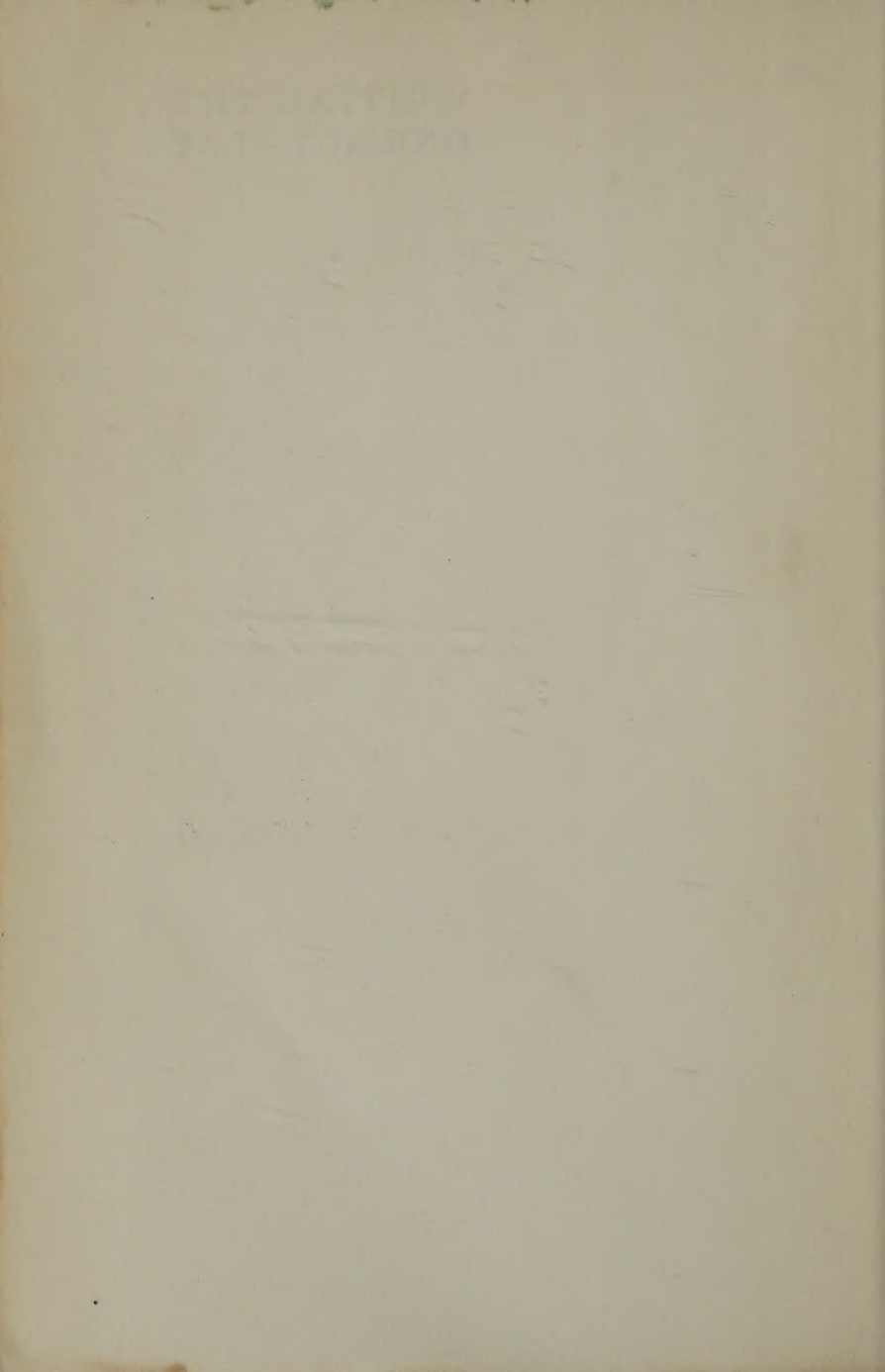


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WRITING THE
ONE-ACT PLAY



WRITING THE ONE-ACT PLAY

A MANUAL FOR BEGINNERS

BY

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ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

"Le théâtre est, avant tout, chose de
fantaisie; je ne comprends donc pas
qu'on l'emprisonne dans un système."

ALEXANDER DUMAS.

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FOREWORD

In adding another to the books on dramatic technique already in print, I feel that I owe the public an explanation, if not an actual apology. Less than two years ago Mr. Percival Wilde, author of several volumes of short plays, published his *Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, dealing, in a far more exhaustive way, with the same subject that is dealt with here. What need, then, of more of the same thing?

Just this, that Mr. Wilde, like Mr. William Archer in his *Playmaking* and Mr. George Pierce Baker in his *Dramatic Technique*, tells too much—too much, that is, for the beginner. All three books are splendid sources of reference, but as such they are for the advanced student. Writing even the simplest play is a task so complex and puzzling to those who undertake it for the first time, that they should be burdened, it seems to me, with as few details of theory as possible. Give them the main outlines of their problem and let them work out the exceptions, variant methods, and such fine points for themselves—that is the principle I go on. That, moreover, is the principle for which I have written this book, keeping as well as I could to what I consider the really big problems and letting everything else go. I have tried to write a book that the veriest amateur may use in building his first—and

even his second—play. After that he will no doubt be ready for more theory, and he should then go to Wilde.

Another difference between my book and the three I have mentioned is that, whereas they are written for the critic, mine is written for the dramatist. I mean that I have written more than they with an eye to the problems which confront the quite inexperienced young person who thinks he would like to try his hand at writing a play. Much of the material, and most of the ideas, contained in the following pages come from my own students. In the belief that their difficulties and experiences are typical of the difficulties and experiences of all beginners, I have based a considerable part of my illustrations on their own work, thereby giving the discussion a practical turn which will make up, I trust, for the homely flavor that much of it has. There is a difference between critical theory organized compendiously for the general reader, and critical theory organized selectively for the apprentice craftsman. Upon this difference I have based my book. The method I follow is the method I have used, with fair success, in my own classes.

As regards technical treatises on playwriting, they all follow one another in dealing mainly with the traditional type of play and ignoring fantasies, symbolic and expressionistic plays, and other departures from the norm. The reason is that the problems of such plays are too diverse to be treated *en masse*. Each problem must be studied for itself. Furthermore, ar-

tistic caprice is so free in such plays that it would be useless pedantry to reduce them to rule. But the normal or traditional type is based on agreed methods of procedure, so that reduction to principle, however much it may annoy certain liberal souls, is neither useless nor pedantic.

That playwriting can be taught—up to a certain point—I have no doubt. On the whole I agree with Mr. St. John Ervine, who has said somewhere that the main use of books of technique—or of instructors—is to tell what *not* to do. But then there is so much which one ought not to do in writing a play that this service is by no means small. Beginners need more guidance there than in any other form of literature; at least I judge so from the way in which students who have ambled easily through courses in poetry, essay, and short story stumble and flounder when they come to me. Usually the help I can give them puts them on their feet so that they do, ultimately, very decent work. Occasionally they do surprising work, creditable to any youngster, but really surprising as coming from people who do not set foot in a theater so often as half a dozen times a year. But then I know that it is not I who have taught them, nor any of the excellent books by Mr. Wilde and Mr. Baker and Mr. Archer that I make them read. In truth, they have passed beyond the mark at which teaching ceases; and how they have managed to do what they have done is one of the mysteries that not even the artist knows much about.

CHAPTER I

THEME OR IDEA

1. *Short Story and Short Play.*

Most writers who deal with the one-act play compare it with the short story, pointing out that as the short story is to the novel, so the short play is to the full-length play. The validity of this algebraic equation as regards mere size is undeniable, but at the same time a closer and more questionable parallel is usually implied; that is to say, the artistic principles of the short story are similar to those of the short play, and although the narrative mode is different, the same considerations govern the selection of the theme and its development. It is true that in certain well known instances an exchange of influence has taken place between the two forms; Strindberg, for example, was guided in the development of certain of his dramatic theories by Poe's famous assertion of short-story unity. Yet the similarity between short story and short play is apparent rather than real. The test of intimacy would be the easy conversion of story into play, but as a matter of fact very few stories are thus easily convertible. They are as likely to lend themselves to treatment in three acts as in one,—witness the recently successful

Rain, and *Alias Jimmy Valentine* of an older generation, developed respectively from short stories by Somerset Maugham and O. Henry. In fact, the more one compares short stories and short plays, the more clearly one sees that the only resemblances are those of length and unity of effect, whereas in regard to themes and their development the differences are fundamental; and because an understanding of these differences should be of use in defining what a dramatic theme is, I shall try to make clear wherein they consist.

Of all writers of short stories with whom the average reader is familiar, I dare say that O. Henry is the one most generally regarded as inherently dramatic. His boldly and clearly drawn people, his "dramatic" plots seasoned with coincidence and surprise in a way which recalls certain phases of the theatre, his crisp dialogue full of "mots de caractère" which might often be lifted bodily to the stage—these are some of the reasons why, at first glance, O. Henry's stories seem admirably adapted to dramatization. Furthermore, the author himself is aware of this inclination toward the theatre; he treats his stories as though half dramatized, talks about setting the stage or raising the curtain, and thus nourishes the illusion that his stories are plays which for his own reasons he has chosen to write in narrative form. But it *is* an illusion. Occasionally one comes upon a story, like "Past One at Rooney's," which could be arranged for the stage in a single scene, but the great bulk of them are unadaptable, and for more reasons than one.

First, they are, for the most part, too incredible. Take, for instance, "The Thing's the Play,"¹ a story which O. Henry treats throughout in terms of the stage.

A young girl is loved by two men. On the night of her wedding to one of them the rejected suitor forces his way into her room and is discovered by the husband, who promptly renounces his wife and deserts her. Twenty years pass. The wife, still beautiful and still faithful, is keeping a select boarding house. Two of the inmates thereof are in love with her, and both make a strange impression of old times. Sure enough, they are the husband, suffering from aphasia, and the lover.

Well, here is a story that could be arranged for the stage; it would have to be done in two scenes, but it could be done. But what would the stage make of it? Can you not hear the groans of disgust, the whistles and cat-calls that would damn this piece of ancient artifice? "Theatrical in the worst sense—utterly unreal," would be the verdict. Perfectly true; and true also that the strained coincidence which would make the play ridiculous exists as well in the story. But O. Henry, using the resources of his art, can and does throw a misleading glamour over the story that distracts our attention from the artificialities; we are more interested in the narrator's personality than in the story he is telling. On the stage, however, that personality would vanish, and the story would stand out stark,

¹ In *Strictly Business*.

unrelieved, trite, incredible. Obviously, then, in a story there are many things besides action and character, and in a readable story these two may even be nil; but on the stage action and character bear the heavy brunt, and they must be stout enough to support the weight laid on them.

Secondly, O. Henry's themes are for the most part too fragile. They are anecdotal, sufficient for the light, casual stories that he weaves about them, but too flimsy for the stage. It is well to bear in mind that in comparison with any printed story even the airiest stage play involves a quantity of labour—gathering and rehearsing a cast, preparing the stage, and assembling an audience—which demands in compensation that the play shall satisfy with something more than a moment's amusement. The hearer must be left with no irritating after-sense of having been lured into a theatre to be put off with a trifle, something which might have been worth ten minutes by the library lamp but not more. Take, for example, "The Thing's the Play;" aside from its other lets and hindrances, the story would not serve as a play simply because it would seem too inconsequential. In essence it is the history of a wife who loses her husband by accident and recovers him, by accident, twenty years later. It is an anecdote, no more—an anecdote which illustrates nothing, proves nothing, answers no questions except the trivial one: "Isn't it queer how things turn out?" Or take some of O. Henry's most admired stories. "After

Twenty Years”¹ tells of two men who agree to meet twenty years hence on a certain street and compare notes on their success in the battle of life. When they keep their appointment one is a police detective and the other a notorious crook. Thereupon one friend puts the other in jail. Here is dramatic contrast, certainly, and a piquant contrast. But as it stands, the story is too thin; one can see how it might be made the *beginning* of a play, but the main part of the action would have to be invented. Or again, take that delightful farce “A Harlem Tragedy.”²

Mrs. Cassidy lives happily with Mr. Cassidy, who has an annoying way of blacking her eye occasionally, but who always makes up in princely fashion and thus brings into her life the delicious zest of variety; whereas Mrs. Fink is unhappy with a model husband who never lifts even his voice against her. Finally in desperation she provokes the spineless one with words and blows, hungry for the beating that will make her a happy wife. But when Mrs. Cassidy, hearing the unwonted commotion above, hastens to Mrs. Fink’s apartment, she is met at the door by a woman dissolved in hopeless tears. “He—he never touched me, and—he’s—oh, Gawd—he’s washin’ the clothes—he’s washin’ the clothes!”

This is deft, cheerful comedy, rising to a well contrived climax, with the curtain speech ready at hand. But here again the theme is too slight, at least as O. Henry

¹ In *The Four Million*.

² In *The Trimmed Lamp*.

deals with it. He gives most attention to the Cassidys, whereas if the thing were to be done into a play the center of interest would be the Finks, especially the male Fink; and that would be quite another story. Or take "Between Rounds,"¹ in which we are told how Mr. and Mrs. McCaskey, who are forever throwing the dishes and bric-a-brac at each other, are melted into a loving mood by the loss of a little neighbor boy, only to renew the battle with greater heat when the boy is found. Or take handfuls of other stories in the dozen or more of his volumes; in nearly every case you will find that the themes are too fragile to bear the weight of stage paraphernalia. There is all the difference in the world between a theme that will serve for a story and a theme that is stout enough for a play.

Thirdly, O. Henry's narrative method is the method of short story, not of play. That is to say, instead of being concentrated and, so to speak, crystallized, it is free, fluid, discursive. Using the privilege of his art, he flits, in these tight little stories, over scores of years, leaps in a twinkling from place to place, changes his point of vantage from one observer to another. But the maker of one-act plays must see his action naturally centered in one place, beginning, culminating, and ending there. Moreover, it must be done wholly in dialogue, without a chance of intervention from the author. What would he do with "The Pendulum"?² Here is a story with a good theme, which tells of a young

¹ In *The Four Million*.

² In *The Trimmed Lamp*.

husband, John, fallen into the dismal rut of married life. Every evening after a wordless dinner he reaches for his hat and guesses he will "go up to McCloskey's and shoot a game of pool." Then one day he finds a note telling that Kate has been called away suddenly, and in the succeeding days of loneliness, as he goes over his shortcomings, he recognizes and confesses them all. When she comes back, he says, what a different husband he will be! Then she does, suddenly, come back, and after the first surprised greetings John reaches for his hat and guesses he will "go up to McCloskey's and shoot a game of pool." Well, here we have it—a complete bit of ironic comedy. But what can we do with it? How can we show on the stage, with anything like O. Henry's swift and sure economy, the deadly life this pair have lived? Yet we must do it, if the point of the play is to be "put across." Further, what can we do with the lonely days that are passed while John is making heroic resolutions to be an unselfish husband? Possibly we could condense the whole action to half an hour, so word the letter that John would think he had been deserted, and give him a male confidant—one of the "McCloskey" boys—for him to pour out his regrets upon; but in so doing we would wholly destroy the essence of the story, and in its place we should have that useless piece of lumber, a dull play.

Similar difficulties would arise, I venture to say, with nineteen out of twenty short stories, chosen at random. The reader may object that O. Henry's an-

ecdotal romances are not a fair test of this generalization, and that the work of other writers has more body. But the stories of Stevenson, to take an artist of a different calibre, will yield the same results when brought to the same test. Not a few attempts have been made, we are told, to change "The Sire de Maletroit's Door" into a one-act play, and all of them have failed. The reason why they must fail, in spite of the fact that the action passes in a relatively short space of time and in one room, is clear and insurmountable. Stevenson brings two young people together under peculiar circumstances, creates a romantic dilemma in which a natural attraction is counterbalanced by certain niceties of honor, and then solves the dilemma by a long conversation, lasting through the night, treated briefly and vaguely, in a way that could not possibly be handled in the theatre. The writer of romance deals with this scene as one of slight importance—he tells us in a few words that Denis and Blanche adjust their difficulties; but the playwright must *show* them doing so, a thing which he can not manage without a long, low-keyed dialogue at the end of his play, at the very place where emphasis and movement are needed. "Markheim," another tempting story, involves the apparition of a murderer's better self (identical in appearance, of course) and again a long, low-keyed dialogue in the latter half of the play.¹ Thus both of

¹ Cf. Percival Wilde: *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, p. 206.

these stories are built badly for plays, in that they open with an exciting action and then drop off into reasonable, i. e., unemotional, conversation.

The fact is that so few stories lend themselves to dramatization because they are written in a different idiom. Indeed, far from expecting an intimate correspondence we ought to regard it as an accident when it occurs. Many times my students have brought me ideas which were better suited to stories than to plays, and occasionally I have had some difficulty in persuading them that it would be unwise to follow them up. When they have persisted, the resulting plays have invariably been failures. Therefore, the first advice that I should give the beginner who thinks that he has got hold of a good theme or idea for a play, is to make sure that it would not serve better for a story. The chief test of the right theme is that it cries for stage representation.

2. The Qualifications of a Dramatic Idea.

In looking over the yarns of O. Henry we have seen that they are unsuitable for dramatic treatment because they are incredible, too fragile (or perhaps incomplete would be better) and unmanageable. Therefore we may base our positive summary of the qualities of a good dramatic idea upon the opposites of these defects. I use the word "idea" in preference to "theme," because the latter term is often confined to

the moral issue of a play. The idea is the seed from which the play germinates. I call it also the "germ idea."

First, then, a good idea must be credible, and credible not in the manner of the short story but in the manner of the theatre. This is tantamount to saying that the burden of proof is stronger on the playwright than on the romanticist, merely on account of the grosser objectivity of the stage. We receive far stronger impressions of what we *see* than of what we merely *read* about, as Horace long ago observed and as every successor of Horace has found it necessary to repeat; and because these impressions are stronger, so also are any imperfections of probability, any overstrained coincidences, any unexplained actions, any motiveless changes of character. Although life is full of freaks of fortune and incomprehensible vagaries of character, the theatre audience expects that in the play before it the principle of cause and effect will be rigorously applied, and it will raise a clamor if it can not find the proper antecedent for every action. Under the head of credibility I would also exclude trite themes and situations, because on account of their triteness they seem false.

Secondly, the idea must involve a single effect of action. That is to say, the plot which is to be built from the germ idea must be strictly disciplined by the principle of unity. Now short-story unity and short-play unity are not the same, for in the short-story, nowadays, the only unity which is still universally insisted

upon is that of mood. Miss Mansfield's splendid story, "The Daughters of the Late Colonel," for example, has no plot at all, but gains its artistic perfection through singleness of mood. Even in plotted stories it is possible, so long as the mood is not violated, to start half a dozen lines of action and perhaps never finish some of them. But the playwright does not have these liberties. He must develop only one line of action, and he must center it upon a single climax. Therefore he must take care that his idea is limited enough to do that. Clearly, he has room for only one story, so that he can not manage a sub-plot. But more than that, his story must move on one point; that is to say, it must have unity of climax. Mr. Percival Wilde has charged *Granny Maumee*, a negro play by Mr. Ridgely Torrence, with a violation of this principle.¹ The play really has two climaxes, the first in which Granny Maumee recovers her eyesight and discovers that her new-born grandchild has white blood; and the second in which, after preparing to avenge the outrage to her family pride, she hears the spirit of her dead son counseling forgiveness. One might say that the second climax arises naturally out of the first, but it is none the less true that the play falls into two parts almost as surely as if it were written in two acts. And this is not to be recommended.

Thirdly, the idea must promise a play that is substantial and complete. This is exceedingly important and, I am afraid, not easily made clear. An idea is

¹ *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, p. 204.

substantial when it contains enough meat to justify writing, producing, and attending a play, and it is complete when the resultant play satisfies all reasonable questions. With the quality of substantiality I am not particularly concerned at present; I will attend rather to the quality of completeness. Let us consider two of the stories that came before us in the previous section, "The Thing's the Play" and "The Pendulum." The latter is, from the point of view of drama, complete—one could easily write a play, not on the same story, but on the same theme that routine is stronger than human will. But the other story is incomplete, in spite of its heavier action, because it would leave us with a dissatisfied feeling that although things had been brought to a conclusion, it was not a conclusion that *meant* anything. Now if we examine "The Pendulum" somewhat more closely we note the following circumstances: first, that the conclusion logically develops out of the beginning; secondly, that the theme, as I have stated it, is an arguable proposition; and thirdly, that the action of the story based on this theme makes a complete circle, ending at the point where it began. For these reasons it is complete and well suited to dramatic handling; and precisely because the other story does not satisfy the first two conditions it is not complete and is not suited to dramatic handling.

Before undertaking to defend these principles, let me check them against a few well known plays. The theme of Lord Dunsany's *Glittering Gate* is that the

Hereafter is an illusion. It is first stated in the empty beer bottles that descend out of the infinite to tempt Jim and in the mocking laughter that greets him every time he opens one, and it is completed when the gate of Heaven swings open and discloses empty space. The final answer has been given—there is no more to say. In the same writer's *Lost Silk Hat*, the theme is that mating is at once absurd and paramount in the lives of men. The play begins with a man's leaving a house and closes with his reëntering it—the wheel has come full circle. The theme of Schnitzler's exceedingly clever play *Episode*¹ is that we never know whether other people have the same idea of us that we have of ourselves (an immensely fruitful theme, be it said, for ironic comedy). The action opens with Anatol gossiping to Max about his love affairs and dwelling sentimentally on one girl who, of them all, he is confident will not have forgotten him, and closes with the same girl vainly trying to recall Anatol among her many affairs. The theme of Barrie's *Rosalind* is that a woman is as old as she wishes to be. The play follows the circle of Rosalind's youthfulness, her lapse into comfortable middle-age, and her return to youthfulness. The first section, it is true, is not included in the action, but it is presented to us throughout the dialogue.

All these plays illustrate the principles which I have derived from "The Pendulum." All of them are reducible to propositions, not necessarily propositions to

¹ One of the *Anatol* series.

argue about, because the stage is a place where it is just as well not to argue, but better still propositions that can be amusingly illustrated. Not all of them present the symbol of the circle, but they nevertheless have a principle of balance which amounts to the same thing. All of them, moreover, end in a logical derivation from the beginning. Do not misunderstand me to mean that plays are to be built out of geometry and logic; what I mean is that every good play has these qualities of balance, of symmetry, of nice adjustment of parts, of satisfaction of an interesting question raised at the beginning,¹ and that these qualities are inherent in its theme.

Fourthly, the idea must be manageable, that is, amenable to treatment in one act. This point ought not to require much discussion, although I find that it causes a great deal of trouble to beginners. A little reflection on the necessary course of the action will show you whether the theme you have in mind can be developed, without forcing, in a natural, close sequence. If it can not so be treated, or if it can only by violent packing, then it should be avoided. I find that my students are much inclined to use the convenient curtain which bridges an awkward gap in their scheme of time, and I always strongly object, not because such a curtain may not be used on occasions with good effect, but because in most cases it is a confession of incompetence.

¹ Wilde has well treated this matter of question and answer in Chapter X of *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*.

Fifthly, the idea must be dramatic, a requirement which would seem to cover all the rest, and broadly speaking does so; but what I mean at this point is that it should be a theme which calls for illustration on the stage, not in essay, story, or debate. Many ideas which satisfy my other requirements are so keyed that they will be more effectively expressed in a less objective, more allusive, explanatory, or descriptive fashion. Especially is this true of themes which depend heavily on the artist's personality, as in the stories of Katherine Mansfield; but it is always true in cases where interpretation is more important than visualization. The test of a dramatic theme is that it can be expressed in no way so well as in visible action on a stage. Here is involved that unteachable and undefinable thing called dramatic sense, without which a play, even in the most intelligent hands, becomes only an exercise in dialogue. In most cases, I believe, this sense is inherent; in others it may be acquired by close study of the stage; but without it the dramatist is at sea. The true dramatist, I feel sure, never conceives his ideas as abstract propositions, for which he later contrives an illustrative action, but conceives the theme and the means of illustration *at the same time.* The theme comes to him as a visual image of certain persons behaving in a lively and interesting fashion, and this visual image is the *sine qua non* of the dramatist. You must *see your people.* Frequently this dramatic visualization, this lively impression of conflict between people or of situation in movement, comes before the

theme, and I have no doubt that often a play has been pretty well blocked out before the theme which is to give the final symmetry suggests itself. I have had many experiences with the failures that come from a neglect of this cardinal principle. Recently a student wrote a play which originated from a vivid sense of the constant friction, the jars and bickerings, that often make family life. He saw his people clearly, he felt clearly the mood of their relations, and he expressed these things well; but having done that, he found that he had run into an impassable barrier. With a story he could have rested there, but with a play he had to make something happen; and he had not provided for that. His repeated efforts to force an action upon his theme were all fruitless; the play still hung fire. Had he conceived his idea dramatically, instead of statically, he would have found it easy sailing.

Finally, the idea must be economical; that is to say, the play to which it leads must cost as little as possible to produce. This is practical commercial advice, which will be ignored by all those who write, not for production, but for their own spiritual satisfaction. To be sure, the æsthetic value of a work of art is not dependent on its expense budget. But dollars and cents are often more potent in the world of affairs than principles of art, and little theatres, amateur or professional, which form the chief market for short plays, are notoriously poor. Consequently any one who yearns to see his play on the boards will take the

cost into careful account, making the cast as small as possible and devising a setting that is at once simple and cheap. Mr. Eugene O'Neill, in his early volume of plays called *Thirst*, ignores these considerations grandly. The title play is laid on a raft in midocean; another is laid in a life-boat in midocean and requires an iceberg among the properties; a third is divided into two scenes, the first laid in the dining room of a Harlem flat and the second on the deck of a transatlantic liner. Now these plays are not only out of the question for amateurs, but they would tax the resources of a fairly well equipped theatre. And even a wealthy commercial manager is not likely to stage a play which involves a cost out of proportion to its length and intrinsic value.

One reason why Lady Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward*, Miss Brown's *Joint Owners in Spain*, Miss Glaspell's *Trifles* and *Suppressed Desires*, Miss Gerstenberg's *Fourteen*, and Sir James Barrie's *Rosalind* have been so much played, is that they are financially "practicable"—that is to say, cheap. Nor is this by any means the least weighty reason.

3. *Examples of Ideas.*

It is now time to turn from abstract postulates to concrete examples. Therefore I propose to examine briefly, with a view to determining their usefulness, a number of ideas which have been submitted to me from time to time as starting-points of plays.

There was a crazy woman who lived alone in a little house by the highway that led through the pass of the Vosges at Belfort. She would sit all day by the window and count as she beat on the panes with her clenched hands. They said that she had lost no relatives in the war but that she had been ill during the troop movement at the beginning of the war and for five days had listened to the beat of the feet of soldiers.

A stimulating suggestion for a story, without doubt; but where, asks the practical dramatist, is the play in it? Perhaps the old woman could be used with effect as a subsidiary figure in a war play, but she herself does not suggest any line of action. The best we can do with her is to keep her in mind for use when we have found the right setting for her.

A man has reached the limit of his desire—comfort, children, a good home. His wife wants power. Each follows his desire. The woman returns to try to jar the man out of his rut, but he remains passive. She leaves again, very sad.

Here is an idea which, aside from its being somewhat shopworn, has possibilities. It has already taken such shape in the author's mind that we can readily see the outline of the action. But in the first place, it is rather too large for a short play; it goes too profoundly into the lives of both people to be susceptible of adequate expression in one act. And in the second place, it threatens direfully to be a play of argumenta-

tive dialogue, serious and dull. The thing could be done, but I gravely doubt if the beginner could strike fire from it.

A reporter, getting into a house to steal a picture of a bride before the wedding, is mistaken for the best man by the bride's family, who do not know the best man.

A good start for an amusing play, but only, let it be noted, a start. The initial idea ought to carry you farther into the play than this. It is ten times better to know how your play is going to end than how it is going to begin. The student who proposed this idea could not tell me what was to follow, except "complications." Far too many beginners launch out into a play with only the vaguest notion of the direction in which they are to sail.

A Russian girl in America betrothed to a young Russian-American falls in love with an American. Parents of the two clash in ironical conclaves. The girl marries the American to the disgust of her own people and the American's, but mutual reconciliation and happiness follow.

This is typical of ideas composed without the least dramatic sense or feeling for the limitations of the one-act play. How is all that to be done in the allotted space—the family quarrels, the marriage, the reconciliation? What we have here, if anything, is the germ idea of a novel.

A girl, thinking she is a failure as an artist, promises to marry a man who loves her. Later she finds she is a success. Purpose: to study the reaction on her.

Of course this would have to be taken at some decisive moment when she learns that her last book, or play, or picture, has made a hit—an exceptional situation but at least possible. The play would then fall into two sharply contrasted parts. A feasible idea, but not one that I could be enthusiastic about until I was persuaded that the treatment would not be mere dialogue. If the girl were made charming and temperamental one might make a play on the pattern of Barrie's *Rosalind*.

At a masquerade party a youth corners a girl in a deserted hallway, thinking she is his sweetheart. He makes love to her, finally mustering enough courage to kiss her. She proves to be his sister, or the cook, an old lady, etc.

And what then? A perfectly good scene for light, very light, comedy, but hardly enough for a play. I feel that with the unmasking the play has just begun; what comes after is of more consequence than what goes before.

A writer, fairly known, dies and awakens in Hell. His cellmate is a quiet chap. The writer boasts about himself, patronizes his cellmate. . . . In the end the quiet chap introduces himself as Shakespeare, or some other equally great personage.

I should feel pretty dubious about this until I knew what the inventor proposed to do with it, and that he had the stuff in him to do it in the right way. The idea demands ironic humor and the gift of brilliant dialogue. Without these it would be juvenile. But to end the play at the point indicated would be a mistake. The momentary surprise of the revelation is too shallow; it is at best an interior climax, a step from the introductory section to the focal section, in which the main theme is to be developed. The play would then fall symmetrically into two parts, the first belonging to the fairly known writer, and the second to Shakespeare.

Three tramps seek shelter in a deserted shack. They quarrel over which one shall occupy the lone cot in the place, and one of them is killed, the other two fleeing in terror.

This idea is representative of a fairly common type of story in which, from a peaceful beginning and by trivial steps, a grievous catastrophe is derived. Its advantages are a strong and steady upward movement and a powerful climax. Whether, in this particular case, the play makes the right effect of logical movement and of strength, or whether it offers merely a casual catastrophe, depends entirely on the meaning which the author writes into the succeeding incidents. I should advise him to consider carefully the identities of his three men and the *casus belli* before deciding on these elements as given above. Other men, and an-

other quarrel, might greatly deepen the significance. It is worth noting that the plot bears a close relation to the great and ancient story of the thieves who quarrel fatally over their loot, as told by Chaucer in the "Par-doner's Tale" and by Kipling in the "King's Ankus." Any one acquainted with either of these stories will detect the poor blood in the present descendant.

A country house in the hills of Kentucky. An old lady has discovered a neighbor in her hen house, stealing. She now has him locked in a back room. Officers come to get him for another crime. What does she do with him?

There are possibilities here; one can feel the situation, and it is a good one. What is made of it depends, of course, on the old lady, which means specifically that the author must have a point of character to prove or illustrate. He must know his old lady pretty well. The play contains the common and always useful device of the reversed situation; i. e., a person committed to one line of action is confronted with a situation that demands a directly opposite line. A favorite version is to have a man denounce some misconduct that does not immediately concern him and tell what *he* would do in So-and-so's case, and then to bring him face to face with the same thing in his own household. Let it be noted that the present idea may be developed comically or seriously with almost equal facility. The hen house, certainly, inclines toward comedy.

The finding of a good theme or idea does not, of course, guarantee a good play, but so much labor and disappointment can be saved by getting a right start that the pains spent on testing and rejecting themes are well worth while. What the good theme provides in addition to the raw material of the play is a sense of direction, of knowing what one wants to do. Having given it sufficient thought, the writer ought to have a fairly definite notion of the scope and purpose of his play. He will then proceed to determine the characters and block out the action, at first roughly, then in finer detail, allotting the emphasis and proportioning the parts to his purpose. But these processes require a chapter to themselves.

CHAPTER II

DEVELOPING THE IDEA

1. *Saturation.*

"When I wrote a play about farming people," said Mr. St. John Ervine in an interesting article "On Learning to Write Plays,"¹ "I thought of a farm, and I tried to visualize the whole countryside in which that farm was situated, so that I knew not merely the names and characters of the people who came into the play, but also the names and something of the characters of the people who were their neighbors, but did not come into the play. I knew the name of the nearest market town and the number of miles between it and the farm. I knew how many churches were in the district and what doctrines were preached in each of them, and I was able to tell the actors in America who took part in the play just what crops were growing in the field outside the farmhouse. A dramatist should know his people so well that he can tell you all about their lives before the play began, and tell you what is going to happen to them after the play ends."

¹ *Living Age*, January 1, 1921.

This is asking a good deal of the dramatist. I am sure that my students could not tell me half of what Mr. Ervine thinks they ought to know, nor would they think it important that they could not. Yet Mr. Ervine is right. The one best way to set about developing the germ idea of a play of real life is by saturating oneself in the environment of the action. The manner of doing so is clearly enough sketched in Mr. Ervine's summary of his own procedure. The chief elements which help to make the complete picture are the house or place in which the action passes, the families, friends, and modes of life of the persons concerned in the play, and the aspect and life of the community in which the scene is laid. If the playwright can give fairly full answers to questions concerning all these elements, he may feel confident that he knows his setting.

The advantages of such preliminary saturation are these: First, it prevents treating the material of the play vaguely or typically, as most youngsters are prone to do. However much the dramatist may feel that his theme is universal, he desires to give the expression of it a definite, concrete plausibility, as though the events had actually taken place in a town and among people that could be named. Secondly, it helps to insure a uniform tone or coloring to the treatment. How important this is, and how easy it is to go astray on, I shall point out in Section 3 of this chapter. Thirdly, it is a positive help in building plot, as I shall explain in Chapter IV. Other advantages might be listed, but

all of them may be summed up in the assertion that the process of saturation gives an authority over the material of the play which guarantees against careless, slipshod work and against all the faults that arise from ignorance of material. It does not, of course, guarantee against dullness or the faults that arise from ignorance of dramatic method.

I need hardly say that the degree of saturation varies with the nature of the play; that tragedy requires the most, that serious comedy requires more than light comedy, and that *jeux-d'esprit* ordinarily require none at all. But a point which needs some explanation is the relation of saturation to character selecting and plotting; that is to say, how is one to begin saturating oneself in character before the personnel of the play has been chosen? The answer is that one must, of course, have something to work on. If the setting is not obvious in the germ idea it must be decided upon; and the idea will provide at least one definitely conceived character, perhaps more. But with that minimum equipment the dramatist can set about building up the society that encloses his protagonist, imagining various possibilities in the way of relatives and friends, combining and recombining until certain persons stick and become part of the play. This is what he may do if he knows only one or two of the chief characters. But in most cases he has a much more definite notion of the people he is going to use, so that saturation becomes the means by which he strengthens his grasp on the materials of his play.

2. Action.

A student brought me the scenario for his first play. He knew a little about plays, entirely from the reader's end, and nothing at all about the theatre; but he was in earnest, and he had been listening attentively to what I had said in class. My most recent remarks, as I recall, had been about action, the importance of it, and the great dearth of it in student scenarios. His play was inspired, he told me, by a desire to express the loneliness of prairie life, the anxiety of isolated people who live in daily fear of the terrible and unknown. It was to go like this:

Mrs. Baird and her little daughter are sitting at night in a lonely hut somewhere in Saskatchewan. The room is pervaded by the intense stillness of the prairie. "A coyote barks with a dismal, penetrating loneliness that goes to the very marrow of the bones" (somewhat of a problem for the producer). They talk in nervous whispers. The little girl says, "Listen, mother, the wind is shaking the house," and again, "I hear the wolves, mother, they sound nearer. . . . I'm afraid." Presently, Mr. Kidd, a neighbor, drives up to report that his hired man—"he's crazy, you know"—has escaped and all the men-folk are out hunting for him, and that he has brought his wife to stay with the Bairds. Mrs. Kidd, after her husband has driven off, tells that the hired man "has gone off with the long knife we stick into the hogs at butchering, and he's raving mad." Mrs. Baird comments, "Indeed, it's a strange wonder that we're not all gone raving mad ourselves. I feel like it myself, sometimes, so lonely,

girl
quadr

1. girl
1. girl

and sitting here in this pen always waiting, waiting to the little ticks of my heart for my man." The talk drifts on, about the dreariness of winter snows, about crop failures, about more sociable days in a more sociable country, until they all fall asleep. After an hour (marked by the convenient curtain) they are aroused by wheels outside. They crowd nervously to the window, from which they can dimly see a buggy with two figures in it. Have the husbands returned? Has the lunatic been caught? "The door flies open savagely. A stocky, wild-eyed man with a black shaggy beard rushes in carrying a man (Mr. Baird), lifeless, head down, eyes in a glassy stare and blood dripping from his throat and breast where his clothes seem to be cut away. The women stand as if transfixed, their mouths open to scream. 'The Lord is revenged,' comes from the maniac in terrible accents. He dumps the man upon the floor and draws a knife from his coat. The women and little girl scream and run out into the dark prairie pursued by the screeching maniac."

"What is it all about?" I said when I had read to the bitter end. "Why did you cook up this terrible slaughter?"

"You said we ought to have action," the student meekly replied.

He was distrustful that all was not right, for I easily convinced him that action, whatever its virtues may be, is not won by violence, and that a bloody catastrophe must have some closer dependence on the earlier scenes of the play than he had provided. I also persuaded him that he knew much more about small town life in Illinois than about Canadian prairies

or the ways of madmen, and that he would do better to turn his mind to affairs in his own village—which he did, with vastly better success.

Certainly I had to admit defeat in this case, but I stick by my guns, that what most beginners lack in their ideas for plays is action. I have to reject and refashion more scenarios for that reason than for any other. I do not know whether my young people are different from those in other parts of the country in this respect, but I do not believe so. I once gave a course in playwriting to a group of mature women, all of whom were relatively sophisticated in matters of the theatre, and I encountered precisely the same difficulty. To judge by my own experience, I should say that all beginners have a passion for pure dialectic, or pure description, and they do not see that the idea which seems to them so interesting and manageable will, when expanded to twenty pages, give their characters nothing to do but stand and talk at one another. In a great many cases, when I have ordered a twenty-minute play, I have had to point out that the utmost squeezing of the material prepared in scenario will give but ten or twelve minutes.

To return to the Saskatchewan play, certain important lessons are derivable from it. In the first place, the author had not got hold of a dramatic theme—the primary source of difficulty. He wanted to write a play on the loneliness of prairie life. Well and good; I have no doubt that the setting is a good one. But he did not know how that loneliness was

to *express itself*; he had not, when he wrote his scenario, found the action which would rightly correspond to the mood he wished to create. He saw clearly the first scene—the two women and the child conversing nervously at night in their little island surrounded by the black and ominous prairie; but he could not see farther than that. Consequently he was still a long way from having his play. Now to build a play on a static mood is exceedingly difficult; it is not, indeed, impossible, but it is a task for an experienced writer. Therefore, this youngster was beaten from the start. In the second place, let it be observed that there is no interplay of personality on personality, no exercise of will, no play of cause and effect. The women are all passive and the only active agent in the play is irrational. Here again are conditions which are not taboo in drama, but they are rare even among experienced writers; and with beginners they create no end of trouble. Unfortunately beginners are prone to do just this, and I have to exhort them constantly to deal with positive people, with the exercise of positive wills and desires, with the clash of personality on personality. Choose interesting people, I tell them, and people who have a conflict of interests, then make one of them *start something* that will generate a vital spark of movement. In that way your action will move of its own momentum and you will not be obliged to haul it along by main force.

The first thing to do, accordingly, in expanding the idea into a scenario, is to make sure that it has action,

that it will not hang fire or fizzle out like a bad fire-cracker. But there is action and action—the action of Davis' *Blackmail* and the action of Schnitzler's *Literature*. I find it by no means easy to explain what the thing is, with the result that my students often think I mean a great bustling about on the stage. Now this kind of physical activity is by no means to be despised—ideas are made more vivid by embodying them in concrete deeds, and the dramatist can not afford to underestimate the usefulness of business—but the matter of action is deeper, more subtle, than that. *Movement* is perhaps a better word. The play must move, no matter what kind it is, whether farce, serious comedy, or fantasy. And not only must the play move, but the spectator must want it to move; he must himself be positively interested in seeing that it does get, somehow, from the place where it started to the place whither it seems to be headed. If the play has this sense of movement it has action, no matter by what means. There are plenty of examples of plays in which the stage picture consists of nothing but two or more people engaged in conversation, but which are none the less sufficiently endowed with action for their needs. Strindberg's *The Stronger* is an example. There two women are seated in a café, one silent throughout and the other doing all the talking. The talkative one is a wife, the silent one is her husband's mistress. As the wife talks the drama unrolls, not the visible one on the stage, but a larger, silent struggle that has been going on for years between these two

women for the possession of the man. And the play ends when the wife, supposedly the weaker party, proves that she has become the victor. Or consider Schnitzler's little play *The Christmas Present*. Anatol, out shopping for his sweetheart, meets and talks with an older flame. The conversation is light, frivolous, but behind it is subtly revealed, as in the other play, a larger history. In both of these cases the action lies somewhere off stage, much of it in the past, but the dialogue is so contrived that we have a lively sense of this action and are interested in following such glimpses of its course as are permitted us. In the great majority of cases, however, the action is brought on the stage, and certainly the beginner ought to deal with it there.

There is always action when some person wishes to do something and does it, or fails to do it. I do not want to go deeply into the famous argument as to whether a struggle is necessary to drama; the curious reader will find the pros and cons sufficiently set forth in Brunetière's *Law of the Drama*, in Baker, Archer, Wilde, and indeed in all books dealing with dramatic technique. But I should like to point out that a struggle is explicit or implicit in at least nine out of every ten plays written, and that the reason therefore is perfectly clear. A struggle means action; you can't have the one without the other. There is no surer way of generating that vital spark of curiosity in the spectator than by letting him look in on a fight. The struggle may be of any kind—it may be a conscious com-

bat of wits, it may be unconscious on the one side or the other, it may be only a friction of temperaments, it may be tragic or laughable, bitter or good-natured, generous or sly; but whatever it is, the spectacle of two persons pulling in opposite directions is sure to engage that active coöperation of the spectator with the play which is so necessary to success. So much for struggle.

Another aspect of action which is of great importance is business—particularly business which accompanies and emphasizes the dialogue. Keep the eyes busy, I am fond of telling my students, as well as the ears; and I am the more encouraged in this admonition because I believe that a plenitude of business is native to Anglo-Saxon drama. A certain school of classic French comedy did almost entirely without it. When, a few years ago, I saw Marivaux's *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard* played by a French company, I was much impressed by the fact that although there were some few pieces of furniture on the stage no one used them, but that all the characters stood up throughout the play and talked at each other. The stage directions of this play consist entirely of "exit" and "enter." I am not objecting to that mode of play-writing, much less to a play so charming as this one; but I say that it is not the Anglo-Saxon way. Take for comparison a classical English comedy, Congreve's *The Way of the World*. The first act is laid in a coffee house, with the bustle of customary business; the second shows us Lady Wishfort storming at her

maid from among the bottles on her dressing table, and so on throughout the play—the habitual movements and occupations of life accompany and fortify the dialogue. I do not wish to be academic on the subject, and so I shall not carry on a research which might fill the rest of this volume; but I can not refrain from asking the reader whether he thinks he can collect from French comedy anywhere near the same number of card scenes, and chess scenes, and tea-drinking scenes that he can find in English comedy.

This prevalence of business corresponds, I suppose, with certain practical and concrete traits of Anglo-Saxon character. Certainly the American audience likes to see things being done on the stage. Every producer knows the value of by-play; and there is no doubt that many a weak scene has been strengthened by an inspired bit of business. In any case, the playwright should certainly know what an invaluable aid it is to him—how, not infrequently, a mere picking something up, or putting something down, can mean more than the most skillfully worded speech. To cite only one of countless examples, how well the scene in Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look* between Kate and Mrs. Sims goes because Kate is pounding on her typewriter. The intellectual content of the scene could be conveyed clearly enough with both women on their feet facing each other, but with not nearly so strong a sense of reality, of actual living.

The details of business belong to the stage of dialogue rather than to the stage of preliminary blocking

with which we are now concerned, but any scenes dealing importantly with business, like the typewriter scene just mentioned, should be provided in the general laying out.

1. Saturation

2. Action

3. Tone.

Atmosphere setting plot

Next in importance after action I should place tone. The principle of unity of effect which rules with unqualified sovereignty in the one-act play, requires that a tone appropriate to the theme and purpose be struck at the start and maintained to the end. Like most artistic laws, it is easier to state than to execute; yet the execution is after all a matter of taste, and the sensitive writer, the writer for whom harmony has a potent meaning, will observe unity of tone instinctively. Its frequent violation among beginners comes, I find, mainly from the fact that they have not made up their minds what to do. They will begin in a mood of grave earnestness and suddenly break away into farce, or attempt to cap an artificial comedy with a tragic climax, forgetting that the antics they have put their people through in the first scenes of the play forbid their being taken seriously.

A student with an original turn of mind brought me a bizarre scenario in which the stage showed a vertical cross section of a graveyard, the surface of the ground being some eight feet above the stage floor. Below were cross sections of three graves, with their inhabitants, two of them old residents and the third a new-

comer. The play was to show how the new spirit, who on earth had been an elderly professor, is successively robbed of his two ideals, his faith in his young wife and his faith in his book, the work of a lifetime left in manuscript. This disillusionment was to be accompanied by unsympathetic gibes from his two neighbors, who were a hard, cynical pair. As we talked over this scenario we decided that if the thing could be done at all, of which there was considerable doubt, it would have to be done in a dry, unimpassioned, brilliant style, because the whole conception was of the head, not of the heart. It would be most important to strike the right tone in key with the macabre theme, since otherwise the play would be dull or merely absurd. I was greatly surprised, therefore, when the finished play came to me, to find that the whole thing, far from being in the key of intellectual satire, was written emotionally, with sobs, tears, passionate vows, passionate anger, sorrow, suffering, and all that goes with adventure in flesh and blood. Possibly one might be willing to imagine these earthly emotions being carried over into the world of the spirit if that world were represented as a reflection of our own, but to associate them with mouldering bones buried in coffins came as an ugly shock. Imagine the feelings of the people in an audience, who as the curtain arose on the extraordinary scene were prepared either to laugh or to shudder, and who then found themselves called upon to sympathize and weep. The play was all out of tune, hopelessly so, it seemed to me.

Even experienced playwrights do not always manage their tones with success. I have in mind one play which seems to me a glaring example, Miss Gerstenberg's *The Unseen*.¹ This is the story of a struggling architect, his wife, and their comic maid-of-all-work. The play opens with a scene keyed high in farce. Hulda, the stupid, ignorant Hulda, is serving dinner and getting everything wrong. She forgets what to bring in, she forgets how to serve, she drops the potatoes, she falls down, in fact she does everything which a comic servant can do in the cause of easy hilarity. Eventually, completely flustered, she drops an important telegram on the table littered with architectural drawings, and there it lies for a week. In the second scene the architect is very blue because the award in an important competition has been given to another. He is angry at his wife for having, through her poor housekeeping, set up hostile forces against his success. Then the telegram is found, and it turns out to be a notice of victory in the competition, tied to the somewhat singular condition that if an answer is not immediately received the award will be given to the next competitor. At this a dreadful storm breaks; the husband rages like a Herod and the women weep. Hulda is dismissed in deep disgrace. But just then the morning paper reveals the coincidence that the winning architect and the promoters of the competition have all met death in a train wreck while journeying to the scene of their operations. Now it appears that the dis-

¹ In *Ten One-Act Plays*.

graceful Hulda is really an angel in disguise; she is recalled with tears of gratitude, and the curtain falls on a happy family doomed to suffer for life under Hulda's maladministrations.

Whatever other faults there may be in this play, the outstanding one is the violation of tone. We, the audience, are expecting to take the people in the mood of hilarious and conventional farce, then to readjust ourselves to a mood of passion and mysticism, and finally to return to laughter. More than one careful reading has not enabled me to find any point of vantage from which the play can be viewed as a whole. The most plausible solution would be to take it all as extravaganza, but the writing in the middle portion is too serious for that. Furthermore I find it difficult, speaking for myself, to pass from the comedy of dropping potatoes to the comedy of wiping out a trainload of people.

The problem of tone, then, is akin to finding the right gait for a race, or the right palette for a picture. The tone should be that which will harmonize with the other elements of subject, purpose, characters and action, and will give them their true coloring instead of clashing with them. This does not mean, I hardly need to say, that variations of mood are taboo, that, for example, you may not pass from being serious to being gay, or from being ironical to being terrible. But these variations should be within the limits of the chosen mood, so that if a play is keyed to sentimental

comedy nothing is admitted to jar unpleasantly with that mood, and so on. The irony of a terrible play should be the irony that suits with terror, just as the serious moments that are admitted into a gay play should sweeten the gaiety, not sour it.

Tone, after all, is a matter of good taste.

4. *Focus.*

A play, like a photograph, must be in focus. This means, broadly, that the emphasis must be so regulated that the important things shall stand out with due prominence and the less important shall be subdued; more particularly it means that the one thing the play has been written for shall be unmistakably clear. I say one particular thing because the controlling law of unity will not permit of more than one purpose, or one effect, in a short play. Focus, then, consists of so arranging the lights that the artistic center of the play will be illuminated and the rest will be left in semi-darkness.

Focus has to do with all the elements of a play, especially with tone, characters, and scenes.

In the plays of Maeterlinck, or in some of the plays of Dunsany, the focus is upon mood. Nothing counts so much—neither people nor action—as atmosphere, and the whole artistry of the dramatist is concerned with creating and maintaining just the right mood. In Maeterlinck's *The Blind*, for example, there is no nar-

rative movement whatever, but all the focus is brought to bear on the mood of growing terror in the presence of death.

In plays that have two or more characters, and where these are not merely symbols, one will naturally stand out in importance from the others; and it is hardly necessary to say that this character should receive the center of focus. It has been my experience that beginners do not ordinarily have much trouble in focusing their characters, for they would have to be unusually maladroit to give the center of their stage to the wrong person.

But focusing on the right scene is a different matter, and I have found it to give no end of trouble. Before we inquire into the nature of this trouble, however, let us look at the following condensed scenario.

The scene is the city room of a newspaper office, into which opens the managing editor's private office. At the rise, Hal-loran, the rewrite man, and MacDonald, a cynical and boozy reporter of fifty, are finishing up their work. MacDonald "guesses he'll go down and get his check." As soon as he is out of the door, Winters, the managing editor, comes out of his office in a temper, inquiring for MacDonald and cursing him for an inefficient old fool. He asks to have MacDonald sent to him. Mac, when he returns, shows a reluctance to meet the chief. He confesses that, having been sent out to get a "big" but nauseous story, he had been so moved by a little girl whose dog was killed in an accident that he had sent in this story instead. Then he goes in to see the chief. Shortly afterward the cub reporter enters

in great excitement, having overheard, from his lurking place in the morgue, the chief firing MacDonald. He wants to know what the row is about. Halloran reads him the nauseous story, as displayed at large in a rival journal, tells the boy what Mac has done, and delivers, in his own cynical fashion, a lecture on yellow journalism. Mac enters, beaten but not broken. He says good-bye quietly. "Didn't you get the story?" asks the sympathetic cub. Halloran replies for Mac: "He got *the* story, cub, but it wouldn't take yellow ink."

The theme is contained in that last speech, and no doubt somewhere in this inept succession of scenes there is a play. But the first point to notice is that nothing happens *on* the stage, but that of the most important scenes—the scene in which Mac decides to substitute one story for another and the scene in which he is fired—the first has happened before the play begins and the second happens off stage. Nor are any of the scenes admitted into the play capable of bearing the focus. The one in which Mac tells Halloran what he has done is in the development section of the play and consequently comes somewhere before the point of focus. It is true that the succeeding scene between Halloran and the cub bears upon the idea of the play, but it is in reality only a cover scene between Mac's exit and re-entrance; and in any case a focal scene without the focal character would be a piece of eccentricity. The last brief scene is by way of conclusion. No, in the form in which the play is conceived it is evident that the focal scene should be the one between Mac and the

managing editor, a scene in which the emotional and intellectual streams of the play would reach their highest point; but this vital scene is left out. Here, then, is a serious error in focus.

A further consideration of the play, however, will show that the whole thing is placed wrong. When one asks, "What is the really important, the really dramatic, point in this story, the point of greatest movement?" the answer easily suggests itself that it is the moment of MacDonald's choice. The conflict of impulses in this hardened old booze-fighting newspaper man, at once cynical and sentimental, and the resulting victory of sentiment over business sense—here is the heart of the drama. The rage of the managing editor and Mac's dismissal are things which follow as a matter of course and arouse no special interest in themselves. We know that Mac has done for himself once he has made his decision; and that decision, accordingly, ought to be at the center of focus of the play.

When I had explained all this to the author, and he had agreed with me, he recast the scenario wholly, laying the scene in the reporter's room of a police station and dealing directly with the dilemma of Mac's conscience, and then wrote a very fair play from it.

At this point let me warn my readers not to forget, as they are likely to do in reading a dissertation of this kind dealing with technicalities and bristling with "rules," "principles," and "laws," that there are no precepts which govern every kind of play, that every problem must be analyzed and solved for itself, and

that the matter of focus, like everything else, can not be stated in any universally applicable way. Let them remember that I have in mind throughout this volume, a particular type of play, namely, the common or traditional type, such as one usually meets on the stage or in print, and such as nine out of every ten dramatists undertake to write. Therefore what I have to say here, as elsewhere, applies more to this common or garden variety, governed as it is pretty strongly by tradition, than to the rarer hybrids of the dramatic garden.

Whatever may be the case with the exceptional or nonconformist play, it is nearly always true of the usual play that it sets up, in the introductory section, a definite expectation which is to be fulfilled in the focal or climactic part of the play. The first part is given over to whetting curiosity and the latter part to assuaging it; or to use Mr. Wilde's terms, the play opens by asking a question and closes when it has been answered. Thus Schnitzler's *The Farewell Supper* arouses in us the liveliest curiosity when we learn that Anatol is preparing the way for a break with Mimi and that Mimi has come to the farewell supper to declare her intention of breaking with Anatol. The ground is thus prepared for a delightful scene of comedy which is the focal center of the action, and any failure to treat that scene for its full ironic values would cripple the play. Similarly in Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look*, once we have gained an idea of Harry Sims' character and learned that the stenographer who has been sent to his house is his former wife, we have

the liveliest anticipation of what will happen when these two meet. Barrie's preparation for the scene is masterly, but we suspend judgment until we see how well he will handle the scene itself; and that he does handle it with superb skill, I need not tell any one who has read or seen the play.

When such expectations as these are aroused the author is *obliged* to fulfil them. Even when the important scene is not planted with such inevitability, there is nearly always one scene which is more important than any of the others, which gathers all the light rays of the piece and focuses them on the dominant motif. The natural expectation of the reader or audience, when presented with interesting personalities and a cause of dispute, is to see those personalities engaging corps-à-corps in such a way as to satisfy the dramatic possibilities in the situation that has been created. Now my experience has been that unskilled writers usually balk at the important scene. Time after time I have known them to make their preparations with the utmost care, to create curiosity, and to lead their action efficiently to the threshold of their big scene, and then, as if seized with panic, to shut their eyes, duck their heads, and bolt through at breakneck speed. Of course it is not panic, but rather a poverty of mind or imagination which keeps them from moving with the spirit of their plays and realizing that the right moment has arrived to exert themselves to their utmost. The phenomenon has repeated itself so often that I have set it down among my *obiter dicta* that young play-

wrights always succeed better with the first half of their play than with the second. Especially is this true when, as too often happens, they write coldly, not with their hearts but only with their brains. When they throw themselves fervently into the excitement of composition they are not so likely to go astray on this point.

Of course the final success of the focal scene will depend on the writing of it, but the scene should be placed in the play before a line of dialogue is written. That is one of the duties, perhaps the chief duty, of the preliminary blocking out. I am not a friend of haphazard composition, especially in drama. A story can begin well and end badly and still be a pretty good story, but a play which follows that course is nothing but a bad play. You can not know too well where your accents are to fall.

CHAPTER III

SCENARIO

1. *Its Value.*

After choosing the theme, deciding upon the tone and point of focus, and blocking out the course of the action, the next thing to do is to make a detailed scenario. This, I am well aware, is for most people, and especially for young and impatient people, an irksome business; it puts off the attack on dialogue, which they are eager to begin, and demands a great deal of hard thinking. Nevertheless it is the only sensible procedure for beginners. The man who has written half a dozen plays may then be able to decide whether he works to better or to worse advantage with a scenario; for the beginner it means protection against many a wrong step. I have found that nine out of ten scenarios for first plays submitted to me are unfit to write upon, and have to be completely revised. This means that the authors were in no condition of mind to begin the actual composition of their plays, that their ideas were insufficiently digested, and that the resulting play would have been a cripple.

Miss Fanny Cannon, in her entertaining book on *Writing and Selling a Play*, recommends writing out the idea as a story before turning it into dramatic form. She regards this as an efficient preliminary test, but I cannot agree with her. In the first place, as I have pointed out in the first chapter, the fact that an idea develops well as a story is no proof that it will develop well as a play. Secondly, whatever test the story could make is far more efficiently made by the scenario, which parallels the play step by step, and is in fact a digest of the play.

2. *Its Contents.*

Scenarios being nothing but practical notes to write from, each dramatist will make them to suit his own needs and habits of mind. Some will find that jotted notes are enough; others will do better with scenarios developed to the smallest details. The testimony of various writers shows that there can be no uniformity of practice in this respect. For the beginner, however, I should advise a scenario which is neither too slight nor too full; not so slight that it gives an inadequate preparation for the development of the play, and not so full that it binds the free creative spirit. The demands that I make of my own students are as follows:

First, a diagram of the stage, showing entrances, windows, fireplaces, and furniture, if the scene is indoors; or fences, walls, shrubbery, paths, outlines of

buildings, etc., if it is outdoors. This should be supplemented by a description of the set, which besides giving details of properties, decoration scheme, etc., will tell what rooms the doors open into, what parts of the grounds the windows look out on, and where the roads or paths lead. The directions *Right* and *Left*, as is customary, should be used from the point of view of the actor, not of the audience. In this part of the scenario, as elsewhere, it is well to avoid all technicalities of abbreviation (like *R C* for *right center*, *L U E* for *left upper entrance*), and to use straightforward, concise English.

Secondly, a list of characters in order of importance and a description of each. The description should be more than a statement of age, business, and relationship (e. g. *John Franklin, 50, a retired stockbroker; Mary, 46, his wife*), but should be in the nature of a concise character sketch. In fact, I do not object if my students go into these sketches rather fully, because the more they know about their people, the more confident I am of their ability to handle them in dialogue and action.

The degree of efficiency with which my students treat these first two parts of the scenario tells me how seriously they have taken the process of "saturation."

Thirdly, a digest of the action *scene by scene*. Before I go any further I had better explain what I mean by this last phrase.

The word "scene" is used here in the sense it always has in French drama, as defining the sections of

the play which lie between changes of personnel on the stage. The entrance of a character marks a new scene; so does the exit. Dividing *The Twelve Pound Look* into scenes on this basis would give the following result: first scene, between Harry and Mrs. Sims; second, from the entrance of the servant to announce Kate to the exit of Harry to change his clothes; third, between Mrs. Sims and Kate; fourth, from Harry's entrance to Mrs. Sims' exit; fifth, between Harry and Kate; sixth, from Mrs. Sims' reëntrance to Kate's exit; and seventh, between Harry and Mrs. Sims. In the scenario, then, the action should be divided into its succession of stages, marked *Scene 1*, *Scene 2*, etc.

The advantages of this practice seem to me very real. In the first place, it ensures getting the entrances and exits, those important pivots of action, definitely placed; and secondly, it is a serviceable check on the thoroughness of the blocking out. Each scene is a step in the advance of the action; each scene, therefore, has or should have its own particular business to perform. By laying them out thus specifically the author can make sure that he *has* provided the particular business for each of them, and the work of building up the play should become both easier and more certain. Too many youngsters, I find, will plunge into a play with a vague notion that somehow they will get from point *a* to point *b*. By the means of control that I have suggested those notions ought to be considerably clarified.

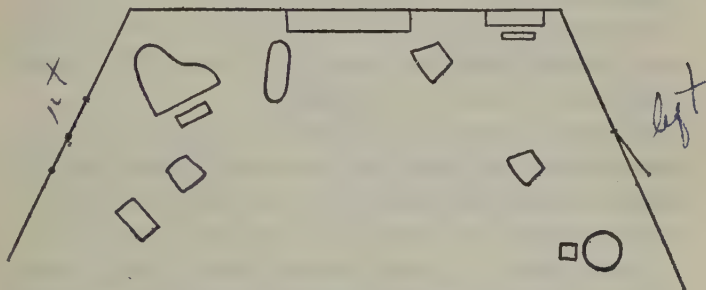
To go on with the scenario, the development of

every scene should contain the gist of what is to be said there and all important business. The careless writer will put down: "Enter John and Francis. They talk for a few minutes. Then enters Mrs. Effingham." This is well enough as a plot of entrances and exits, but a good scenario ought to show the content of the scene, also to establish its identity in relation to the scenes that have preceded and its contribution to the forward motion of the play. A detailed summary of the dialogue is not necessary, but there should be enough to show the course the dialogue will take. Something like this: "Enter John and Francis. John is surprised to see Francis back in town so soon. Francis replied evasively that he has been recalled by business. John 'kids' him about Mary Effingham, and Francis tries to pump John about what happened at the Ralston house party. Scene 3. Enter Mrs. Effingham. She is much upset about a note that she has received from Minnie Ralston." And so on.

Students who write scenarios of this relatively painstaking and elaborate kind frequently admit bits of dialogue, exchanges of two or three speeches. This again is a matter for the individual to decide. I should not advise putting in much dialogue, but a little, here and there, gives a touch of more vivid reality to the dry bones of the scenario and serves to indicate the tone which the actual conversation will take. This is especially useful, it seems to me, in a play which makes much of atmosphere.

3. *Examples of Scenario Form.*

The play for which the following scenario was written has not much in the way of originality to recommend it. But as I shall make use of it for illustration further on, it will be economy to introduce the scenario at this point. Moreover, from the point of view of form it will serve as well as another.



Scene: The living room of a comfortable apartment belonging to Jeanne Turner. At the back center is a large fireplace, at right angles to which are an ottoman and a large winged overstuffed chair. At right back is a baby grand piano with open music on it and two brass candlesticks flanking the keyboard. In the center of the right wall are some large French doors leading out on a fire escape. Opposite, in the left wall, is a door leading into the hall. In the left rear corner is a large, old fashioned spinet on which is a typewriter, bespeaking its owner's profession. Above the desk is a dull blue figured tapestry, and a bowl

of yellow daffodils on top of the desk nod against it. At left front is a small telephone table with desk phone. Three or four mahogany chairs. A Velasquez king over the fireplace and an unusual Corot by the piano. Some Japanese prints. Photographs of friends and relatives on the mantel and desk.

Place: New York.

Time: The present.

Characters:

Jeanne Turner, a successful journalist, about twenty-five; slender, with fine features; a quiet, well poised type, with a touch of melancholy.

Warren Turner, her father, an escaped convict. Somewhere near sixty, thin, stooped, shambling, with unkempt white hair, and shifty eyes; roughly clad and rather dirty.

James Kent, a young doctor, thirty. An honest, manly type, with no particular signs of distinction.

SCENE I

Kent is proposing to Jeanne. He has been suddenly offered a position in the Philippines and must leave at once. Will she go with him? She tells him that it is impossible. He urges his love for her, the attractions of travel, etc., but she still refuses. At length, seeing that he is beginning to doubt her, she tells the real reason. When she was five years old her father, cashier in a Philadelphia bank, had been convicted of embezzling and sentenced to prison. She

had never believed him guilty, had instead made a martyr of him in her imagination. Some ten years ago, before her mother's death, he had escaped, but they had had only occasional word from him. But she knew that he was alive. Now that she has struggled through poverty to success she is going to continue her unremitting search for him. That is why she can not leave the country. Kent begs to be allowed to stay and help her, but she refuses to let him sacrifice his career. He leaves, Jeanne going to the door with him.

SCENE II

The French doors open stealthily and Warren Turner peeps in, enters, and stealthily looks round him. Rubs his hands in pleased expectation as he takes in the evident tokens of wealth and refinement. He goes over to the mantel to look at the photographs. Startled from without, he hides behind the wing chair, which he pulls around facing the fireplace.

SCENE III

Jeanne enters, in dejection. Goes to the spinet desk and takes a picture of Kent which she kisses. On an impulse she runs to the phone, snatches the receiver, and says "I'll go!" then drops the receiver and falls forward on the table sobbing. Warren approaches her somewhat timidly, then with sudden courage taps her shoulder. Jeanne starts up and is appalled at seeing

a strange tramp in the room. He falters, "Jean-nie . . ." She threatens to call the police; then a thought strikes her. "But my name—why did you—?" He tells who he is, and she is horrified, but horror gives way to pity and love. She soothes his feelings, injured by her first reception, and eagerly pours out her plans for them—of retirement to a New England farm, where he will be safe from prying persons and where she can write. Turner is not enthusiastic. He tells her a little of his escape and subsequent life, but unwillingly. He has evidently descended to the level of the "bums" with whom he has associated. During the talk Jeanne picks up Kent's picture, which has fallen. Turner demands to know who he is, whether he has harmed her in any way, threatening vengeance. Jeanne vehemently denies this, and so overdoes her effort to explain a casual relationship that her father gives her no rest until he has got at the facts. Jeanne reverts to her Connecticut farm. Turner is restless and seems to be wrestling with himself. At last he rises with an oath:

"I thought I could do it, but I can't. I ain't that bad, after all."

He tells her that he is not her father, that he knew her father and decided to take advantage of her, but finds he can not. Little by little he convinces her, especially when he invents a heroic death for "Warren Turner" and draws a glowing picture of the dead man's

virtues. This picture makes Jeanne very happy. At last Turner leaves by the fire escape with a generous gift of money.

SCENE IV

Jeanne rushes to the phone to call Kent. As she is heard telling him she can go, Turner slips back and steals over to the mantel. He takes a framed enlarged snapshot of Jeanne and Kent and tiptoes out.

CURTAIN

I subjoin the following piece of engaging nonsense to show that scenario writing is not necessarily a bore. Indeed, the more zest that is put into the scenario, the better for the play. I omit the stage diagram, and I invite the reader to note that a more detailed description of the characters would, in this case, be practically useless as well as artistically wrong.

SHOESTRINGS

THE PLACE: *A room in a tenement building. There is a small gas stove on a packing box at the right back, and a battered kitchen cabinet stands to the left of it. The latter is piled high with dirty milk bottles, cooking utensils, tin cans, and paper boxes. At the left is a tumble-down bed, at the head of which is the entrance door. On the right is a sink, and a door to an inner room down front. There is one dirty window at the rear left. General atmosphere of squalor.*

THE TIME: *The present.*

CHARACTERS: JOE, *the husband; somewhat idealistic, and with more virtues than vices. He is practically a non-speaking part.*

STELLA, *his wife, a woman of slight mentality.*

POLICEMAN.

AMBULANCE DRIVER.

SCENE 1. POLICEMAN, STELLA. (*COP shouts up from the stairs.*)

"Is this where Joe Silitzky lives?"

"Yes, bring him in."

SCENE 2. POLICEMAN, DRIVER, JOE, STELLA.

JOE *is borne in dripping wet and seemingly lifeless. They put him on the bed.*

STELLA remarks that the bed will be wet.

COP grunts.

He quizzes her as to why he found JOE jumping in the reservoir and fished him out. DRIVER *in meantime is working over JOE.*

"I don't know—he didn't tell me anything about it."

Asks her if they had been quarreling.

No, but he had forgot to get her shoestrings.

Cop asks her what they have to do with it.

Doesn't know, but she needed them.

Never mind about them—what was he doing out at that time of night?

She had just told him that she wanted the strings, and he left.

When had he left?

At a late hour.

Why?

The shoestrings. If he got them they will be all wet.

COP (*impatient*): "Why?"

"The shoe—. Joe's been poorly lately and maybe wasn't feeling well."

"He ought to be healthy now—he's been chlorinated and sterilized."

She wanted the strings. He didn't bring them and she asked for them.

And out he went.

(*More work on JOE.*)

That is no reason. She is not telling the truth.

Well, she wanted the shoestrings.

Yes, go on.

And he didn't get them.

And she asked for them.

Nothing strange about that.

And he didn't say anything.

And she asked some more.

And still he didn't say anything.

COP: "I wouldn't wonder."

"And I needed the shoestrings."

Asking couldn't help matters.

But he should have got them.

DRIVER: "He's breathing, but he won't wake."

COP: "I shouldn't wonder."

"I wonder if he did get them."

COP: "I wish he had."

DRIVER: "Gimme a glass of water."

(*STELLA goes to the sink for water.*)

COP: "We ought to have let him stay in the reservoir, even if it does spoil the water."

DRIVER: "Yeh. No wonder he was nutty. All over a pair of shoestrings."

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(STELLA *brings water.*)

"Here it is. It ain't very good to drink though."

COP: "Well, it ain't going to be drunk."

STELLA: "And finally he shook all over and said, 'My God!'"

"And then what did he do?"

"Nothing. I asked him some more and he didn't answer."

"No, and I'd been asking him about them for days."

"No wonder he didn't answer."

"And I always have to do that."

"You do?"

"Yes, and every time since we have been married I've had to. He don't seem to like to listen."

"Oh my Gawd!"

(JOE *kicks at DRIVER. Consequent disarrangement. STELLA continues.*)

Before they were married he liked to hear her talk, but after he seemed to lose interest.

(JOE *has come to and has been lifted to a sitting position by DRIVER. STELLA drops her narrative and says whiningly*)

"Joe, did you get them shoestrings?"

(Joe *thrashes around as though in a fit.*)

JOE: "Arrhhhk!!!"

"Look out for me shins!"

(COP *tells DRIVER to get a straitjacket from the Ambulance while he holds Joe.*)

(STELLA *stands contemplating JOE, and finally says:*)

"Well, I guess he didn't."

CURTAIN

Well, this is pretty light weight, especially for the twenty-minute play it was meant to be, and the reader

must have noticed with critical disapproval that the scenario is very nearly as long as the play would have been. So the play was never written; but I have often regretted since that it was not.

4. *Estimating a Play from the Scenario.*

Having laboriously shaped the play into some semblance of form and set it down in scenario, the next thing to do, as far as one can manage, is to stand off and view it with a coldly critical eye. Certain obvious qualities of the play will already begin to show themselves—the curve of action and points of emphasis—and most of the larger defects of planning can now be detected. Let us see, for example, what can be deduced from *The Return*.

In the first place, whatever may be the fundamental defects of the piece as to triteness and sentimentality, it has its good points, namely, that it will act, and that it gives considerable scope for a character actor in the part of the father. These, I am afraid, are the very vulgar considerations of the commercial theatre, but in fact we can not have read many lines of the scenario without seeing that the play has nothing to offer the Little Theatre, and that its destination, if anywhere, is vaudeville, where one does not have to fear either triteness or sentimentality. The thing necessary there is to move the audience positively by some simple, basic emotion, whether of laughter or tears. This play, it seems to me, has that chance. Now it is well

to know what your stuff is good for, and if it is good for vaudeville, then it should be worked for those values. I have sometimes to wrestle with students who, having proposed a piece of practicable hokum, are determined to write it for the Four Arts Club. The only endurable hokum is honest hokum. Therefore this little play about a long lost convict father who recovers and then voluntarily abandons his daughter, being fundamentally hokum, must be treated honestly as such.

The main character is the father, beyond question. The daughter might be written up to first place, but quite wrongly because there are not half the chances for acting in her part that there are in the other. Now a "fat" star part is, if not absolutely essential, at least exceedingly helpful in selling a vaudeville sketch. So the father is to have all the best lines and all the varied opportunities for acting that we can put in—ranging through the emotional scale from bravado, satisfaction, joviality, cunning, suspicion, anger, uneasiness, longing, cupidity, resentment, to awakening nobility, love, renunciation. The focus is all on him. We see at once that he has a good entrance and a good exit.

We see, also, that the scenario inadequately designates the "high points" of dialogue and action, but that those high points can be easily picked out. The first occurs when Jeanne recognizes her father; the second occurs when he is going through his struggle; and the third and biggest centers about the renunciatory lie. These successive high points, or climaxes, lie well for

the development of the dialogue, and they promise plenty of movement in the main scene.

As to the first scene, being merely introductory and, in a play like this, one might say perfunctory, there is not the need that there might be in a different kind of play of making it entirely plausible. Nevertheless, no harm can come of making it as plausible as may be, and we see that several matters need clarifying and strengthening—why Jeanne has never told Kent about all this before, why she must cling to New York after so many fruitless years of search, why she gets rid of Kent so easily. These are questions to which some kind of answer must be given.

What actually was done in expanding the scenario into a play I shall describe in a later chapter.

The other play, *Shoestrings*, need not detain us long. As I have already said, it has a cardinal defect in that the scenario is practically as long as the finished play would be. Just as clearly as *The Return* does *not* belong to the Four Arts Club, just so clearly *Shoestrings* *does* belong there. Its humor is whimsical and satiric, and its weight a little more than nothing. The air with which it is done counts for everything; and even so I fancy that it would read a little better than it would act.

What I have said in this section about estimating a play from the scenario is intended, perhaps, more for the teacher than for the student. A great deal of help

can be given the struggling neophyte by reading the signs of his play for him from the scenario and pointing out its qualities, limitations, needs, etc. But the dramatist himself ought to be able, in some degree, to take breath after completing the scenario, sit back, and go over the ground again with a calculating, unpassionate eye, looking for flaws in action and motivation, and testing his distribution of climaxes for movement.

5. *Writing from the Scenario.*

Some people, as I have said, write elaborate scenarios, some write scanty ones, and some write none at all. Similarly, in writing their plays, some follow the scenario closely, and others diverge from it at will. Theoretically, if the preliminary work has been done wisely and thoroughly, the resulting play should follow the scenario step by step. But most of us, I fancy, are not built on so methodical a plan, and in the heat of composition we find that we are deserting our carefully marked path and striking out on a new one. There is nothing alarming in this; many experienced dramatists do the same thing. Second thoughts often are best, and there is a validity in the inspirations of a moment that ought not to be refused. Accordingly I should advise the young dramatist to treat his scenario without exaggerated respect; if a better way occurs to him suddenly in the midst of the play let him follow it instantly. In fact, I am distrustful of those who laboriously respect the steps of the scenario, because

they usually bring forth a dry, perfunctory play. Many a play, to its great advantage, bears little resemblance to the drafted plot, but who can say that it does not, for all that, owe an important debt to the hard thinking that has been discarded?

CHAPTER IV

BUILDING A PLAY

1. *Method.*

In the foregoing chapters I have tried to show the various processes which the novice dramatist should follow in carrying a play from the germ idea to the point at which he is ready to attack the dialogue. That into these processes enters a good deal of what is called inspiration—and what is therefore incalculable and irreducible to method—I would not for a moment deny; nor would I pretend that any routine can be devised to suit all temperaments. But that the labors of composition can be aided and simplified by method, I do most firmly believe; and the nature of this method, which has been suggested in the previous chapters, I wish now to define more exactly. Then I shall illustrate how one or two famous plays may have (or should have) been thus methodically built.

The method may be concisely summarized in the statement that the play should grow, like a flower, from the germ or seed idea. The procedure should be as follows.

We shall suppose that a certain young dramatist wants to build a play around a certain type of character—in other words, that the germ idea arises from a perception of character—and that the person he has in mind is an amiable, benevolent, but weak man, whose charity is continually abused by schemers and who is too honest or too simple-minded to detect their unworthiness. Now the first thing the young dramatist does, before he begins to devise any misadventures, is to saturate himself in the subject, which means that he lets his mind dwell on this man until he knows him thoroughly—his age, his appearance, his dress, his manner of speech, his peculiarities of habit. Extending the saturation process, he builds up this man's environment—the town he lives in, the house he lives in, the business he pursues, the friends he associates with, and finally his family. He will know the kind of wife he has, if married, his children, the poor relatives who may be living on him, the people who visit him. By the time our dramatist has dwelt thus long and thus intimately with his subject, he will know him so well that when he begins actually to write there can be no danger of his slipping out of character or atmosphere. He is too well settled at home.

The next step is to determine the incident which will best illustrate the protagonist's dominant weakness; or perhaps our dramatist may wish to illustrate a double aspect of character, the man's goodness and stupidity. Whether this incident bears on the one more heavily than on the other, will be determined

by the tone of the play. Our dramatist therefore turns over in his mind the various possible predicaments, serious or comic, into which his hero may fall until he finds the one which seems to chime with the dominant tone and at the same time allows him to express, in interesting action, the point which he wishes to emphasize. Now it may well happen that the process of saturation will have been of practical help to him in this search. For example, since he knows that clash of character is always good material, he will have imagined a member of the family who will be opposite in character to his protagonist, who will mistrust his charities, and be caustic and hard where he is gentle and yielding; and he knows that this clash of character will be emphasized by other differences, particularly by the difference of sex. Accordingly he will make the antagonist a woman, probably the wife, and something of a scold.

So far so good. Our dramatist has now two serviceable and clearly defined characters. Already he can see all manner of possibilities for amusing scenes between these two. But his cast is not yet complete—what is needed next is a bone of contention. An elderly, tenacious, and complaining female relative occurs to him, but after consideration he puts her aside; she does not offer enough opportunities, and besides he wants some one quite different from the other two. A young man will serve, a plausible, “slick” young man—a nephew rather than a son, because a son would touch uncomfortably on tragedy,—who by his dress, his

smooth tongue, and his man-of-the-world air will contrast markedly with the simple, homely honesty of the older couple.

Not until our dramatist has these three is he in a position to work on plot. Meanwhile, the movement of the play is already taking shape. It will turn on a crisis in this little family, on some particularly outrageous demand of the young man, and on a determination of the wife to bring her husband to reason. The focal scene will be that in which the crisis comes to a head.

From this point several avenues are open for further advance. The simplest is to have the wife triumph or fail, but a subtler and more ironic effect will come from so contriving things that she fails in triumphing, that the very point she has set to win proves in the end to be a point scored against her. Thus it may turn out that the one person in whom she has faith, and whom she had been wont to exalt as a monument of probity, turns out to be the biggest rascal of them all.

As to the minor characters, if there are any, they will be chosen with reference to economy and to the germ idea. It may be desirable, for instance, to introduce one or two of the protagonist's current charities, in order to suggest the background of his daily life and to point the moral of the wife's harangues.

In this hypothetical case, the reader will note, I have supposed that our young dramatist began with nothing more definite in mind than a certain character. That is very little to build on, and I should hope that in

the future he will have something more positive in the form of situation. But I have tried to show that even on so slight a foundation one may build, by a reasonable process of extraction from the germ idea, a fairly decent play.

If the germ idea happens to be a situation, the task is somewhat easier. Supposing that our young dramatist wants to use a dramatic incident which he thinks will make an effective crisis for a play, he will set about deducing the characters from the incident, and searching for the antecedent movement which will lead as quickly as possible, by natural steps, to the crisis. But whatever the point of beginning may be, the method is essentially the same—to saturate oneself in the setting and characters until they become thoroughly familiar, and then by process of comparison and elimination to determine the deed or the course of action which will best illustrate the germ idea and create the proper emotional response.

2. *The Twelve Pound Look.*

The capacities of this method will become clearer if we apply it, not to an imaginary play, but to one already written. I propose to rebuild a play from the ground up as it may conceivably have been originally built. The play I have chosen is Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look*, which I regard as a faultless piece of dramatic architecture. I do not say that it is the

greatest one-act play in existence, but I do say that it is beautifully put together, in such a way as to make it a model for imitation. A very great deal can be learned by pondering on its proportions and articulation. Of course, I do not pretend to say that Sir James Barrie wrote the play in the order which I shall propose, but he is a man extremely wise in the art of playmaking, so that it is quite within the grounds of probability that he proceeded in some such manner as follows. Whether he did or did not is a matter of relatively little importance; the principle is the thing.

I shall talk as though the play were actually under construction.

The germ idea is that a woman, who has left her husband because he is a money-making swine and is stifling her natural life, and who has won a happily modest independence, is years afterward brought suddenly face to face with him. He is rich, she is poor. What do they have to say to each other?

The first deduction to make is that the interest comes from a clash of temperaments. We must emphasize as much as possible, therefore, the differences, material and temperamental, between these people. The moment of return must be as full of antithesis and irony as may be. What shall that moment be?

Answer: The man whom we have in mind is a type of the crass, opinionated, self-satisfied parvenu, a man as far as possible from the wise, witty, charming, lovable woman whom we (Barrie) have imagined for our

heroine. His name suggests him—Sims. For such a man, in British society, the hour of greatest glory would be the hour of his knighthood.

Query: We must bring them together in a way which shall take them both by surprise; how is this to be done?

Answer: We must first consider what her business is. Harry Sims would probably require more servants for his reception, but Kate is certainly not a parlor maid. Furthermore, we don't want to place our action in the hurly-burly of the big event, but in some quiet hour just before or after it. Kate must come in some business capacity—perhaps as decorator. But decorating is a rather fancy calling, and we want to give our Kate something quite humble. Furthermore, a decorator would certainly know to whose house she was going, and Kate must be so very inconsiderable that she is sent off with only a house number as guide. After considering the not very many alternatives we select the common typist from an agency as best fulfilling these conditions. We are aware that the weak point in our logic of action is getting Kate to Harry's house and keeping her there long enough to meet him without her knowing where she is, but we hope that if we put up a bold front no one will notice it (and no one does). On the whole, that idea of making Kate a typist was a good one; and already we begin to see possibilities, extending quite beyond the original idea.

The persons in Harry's household occupy us next.

Shall he be a bachelor? Certainly not, for Harry is not the kind to remain single—that is not his notion of success. Not only that, but if he has remarried the antithesis will be all the greater. So by all means let us have a second wife, and let her complete the picture by being all that Kate would have been had she not broken away. We shall then have, as it were, Harry's wife before and after. What about children? None from the first marriage, because that would introduce a more poignant note than suits our intention; and in any case none on the stage, because they would clutter the action unnecessarily. But there is no objection to letting Harry speak of his children with the pride of the successful father. Any other people, besides a necessary manservant? No old friend of Kate and Harry? No, because no one else is needed. Mrs. Sims will do excellently for any exposition that is wanted of Harry's circumstances and character. She is going to be very useful. Already it dawns on us that we can complete the symmetry of our action by representing her as vaguely restive in her own feeble way, as Kate had been years before.

What shall be our focal scene? Obviously the one in which Kate and Harry unearth the old scandal and Kate takes her revenge for all that she has suffered by exposing Harry to himself. This is what the French would call the "*scène à faire*," the obligatory scene. To dodge this scene would be to dodge the whole play. But we can not plunge immediately into that. We must know something about Harry and Kate; we must

see them and understand them, before they meet, for otherwise all our delicate antitheses will be lost. Certainly we must see Harry at home, as he is today. So the play easily divides itself into two scenes, the first between Harry and Mrs. Sims, the second between Harry and Kate. Then the two women are not to meet? Unthinkable! It would be too delicious a scene to lose—so full of ironic contrasts. Besides, we need a scene in which we can learn to know both Kate and Mrs. Sims. So we add another scene between the two women. Obviously it must come before the meeting of Kate and Harry, and after the scene between husband and wife. We shall have to get Harry off the stage somehow when Kate arrives.

Shall we be content with these three scenes and close with the departure of Kate? But by now we have seen more and more clearly that it is Mrs. Sims, not Kate, who is to give the delicious touch to the end of the play. The period belongs to her, and so we add a brief scene between her and Harry.

Thus the play is blocked out into four scenes, which are well placed with respect to each other and distribute the movement effectively. The first scene will introduce us briefly to the Simses. The second will introduce us to Kate and tell us much more about the Simses. The third will be our big scene, and the fourth will put the epigrammatic close. Now we go back to the beginning.

How shall we open? There are so many ways of "doing" the domestic atmosphere. Yet we want if pos-

sible to strike the spectator at once, so that his curiosity will rise with the curtain. . . . But here I must confess that my "system" breaks down, for surely nothing but pure genius could invent the opening picture as we have it in the play. It is a rehearsal of the approaching awful ceremony. Mrs. Sims, poor shrinking little woman, is sitting bolt upright among her presentation robes, a gorgeous and ridiculous blob of color. Harry Sims, with enough manner for the whole Order of the Garter, approaches, bows, and receives a rap on the shoulder from an imaginary sword. Then the dialogue begins. It is perfect. What spectator, after such a beginning, does not feel a thrill of delighted anticipation? The audience is won on the instant.

I shall not carry my play building farther than this. To do so would be to intrench on the arts of dialogue which I shall treat in a later chapter. There I shall have something to say about the ingenuities of the second scene, and about the splendid architecture of the third.

3. *Schnitzler's Episode.*

Episode, one of the best plays of the *Anatol* series, is excellent in form, but presents a much simpler problem than *The Twelve Pound Look*.

The basic idea here is that a man who believes that a certain girl has loved him with an undying passion, discovers upon meeting her after a lapse of a year

or two that she has quite forgotten him. The tone of treatment is governed by the point of view of the whole group of plays, an ironic analysis of a sentimental young man. The play falls in with that large group which depend for their effect upon turning the tables on some one—a fruitful theme, by the way, of almost inexhaustible variation. There is more than a touch of this in *The Twelve Pound Look*. Let it be noted that both of these high comedies deal with the exposure of the vanity and blindness of men with respect to women. But the Barrie play, because we are passionately devoted to Kate, is more emotional and moving, whereas the Schnitzler play, aloofly ironic throughout, arouses only our laughter.

In all table-turning plays the nature of the subject suggests, in fact almost demands, a division into two parts: the first, in which the protagonist will be involved in a trap of his own making; and the second, in which, by the springing of the trap, he is reduced to absurdity. Thus in the present case we see at once that our man, Anatol, must first be made to commit himself to his fatuous opinion regarding the woman, and that thereupon he must be brought face to face with the truth. There will be, then, at least these two scenes.

Of necessity there must be a third person, one to whom Anatol can talk about his past affairs, one who is friendly to both parties but sufficiently disengaged so that his ironical amusement can emphasize the tone. This person is at hand in Max, Anatol's humorous and

sensible friend, who serves throughout all the plays as a kind of chorus of common sense. Max, Anatol, and Bianca—these three are enough. We open with a scene between the men, and then we bring on Bianca; and inasmuch as Bianca would not be coming to Anatol's rooms, we must lay the scene at Max's.

The play might very easily close with Anatol's discomfited departure. Schnitzler chooses to add a brief closing scene between Bianca and Max, not absolutely needed—not structurally vital like the last scene of *The Twelve Pound Look*—but useful in adding a touch of emphasis to the theme and providing one of those charming *diminuendo* closes of which Schnitzler is so fond.

The contents and general handling of the second or focal scene require no special planning, for any competent dramatist can see at a glance the values that it contains. But the first scene is by no means so clear. A quiet chat between the two friends about old times would very likely be dull. Something must be done to enliven it, to give it an interest in itself, not simply as a preparation for a scene to follow. Schnitzler solves the problem exquisitely.

Enter Anatol laden with little packages. He tells Max grandly that they are all keepsakes of former vanished love affairs; and while Max grins and listens he opens one after another, telling briefly their histories. They are all casual episodes, disappointing for the most part; Anatol is rather cynical about them and about the fickleness of women's hearts. Finally

he comes to *the* episode, the one time when he knew he was loved for himself. The girl was nothing to him, a passing fancy, and yet he treasures a tenderness for her because of her deathless affection for him. She is the one redeeming figure in a world of heartless women. He dwells on her sentimentally. Then Bianca comes in, just back from a theatrical tour and keeping an appointment with Max, who, by one of the permissible coincidences of the theatre, is her present fancy. And so we cross the threshold to the focal scene.

CHAPTER V

CHARACTERIZATION

1. *Observation.*

A knowledge of human character is the bed rock on which the higher forms of drama rest. This I conceive to be an unassailable postulate. The lower forms of farce and melodrama, where action is predominant, may deal lightly with character, although the best of these are often pretty shrewd in their representation of human nature. But comedy and tragedy live or die not by any mechanical ingenuities of plot or situation, but by the depth of their criticism of life. This is not a position that I propose to argue; it has become too firmly established by the best practice and the best opinion. And yet it is a fact so important for the young writer, and so often neglected by him, that it can not be too emphatically repeated. Equally true is it that something more than a knowledge of various kinds of people is required before a dramatist can write with authority; he must have a philosophy of life, something to give him a positive basis for his synthesis. But life alone, and his own inquiring mind, can provide him with that.

More bad plays are written from lack of this kind of knowledge than from any other cause. As Bernard Shaw has said somewhere, the technical secrets of playwriting are very shallow secrets; there are no mysteries here; any one with ordinary intelligence and industry can learn to put a play together. But people are a different matter. I have found it to be unfailingly true of my students that when they know well the inhabitants of a certain community, however narrow—when they have lived with their eyes and ears open to the numberless little important details that make one person different from another—they will write surprisingly well, even though they have never tried their hands at plays before and have rarely been in a theatre. I have a wholesome respect for the mechanical difficulties of playwriting, but when I find writers, as one does every now and then, who lay all their emphasis on these mechanics and give but a perfunctory glance at character, I know that they are profoundly on the wrong track. Of course, any book on technique will give more space to mechanics than to character, merely because the one can be taught and the other can not, but the importance of a thorough knowledge of human nature must never be forgotten.

In this great subject the individual must be his own teacher. Certain hints may be given, certain facts may be called to his attention, as I shall try to do in this chapter. But in the main he must rely on himself; and his means of self-education is, of course, observation. Naturally he will go to life for this. His in-

quisitive and acquisitive eye will be always on the alert for faces, clothes, gestures, gaits, the movements of a man in perplexity, the movements of a man in anger, the movements of a coquetting girl, or of a woman straightening a room. He will know how a certain kind of man wears his hat, the movement by which he pushes it back on his ears in moments of excitement; how another man swings his feet on the porch railing and unfolds the evening newspaper; how one woman drops her hand when she is vexed, and another clutches at her breast; how some people smile by turning up the corners of their mouths, and others by turning them down; how the noses of certain people are curiously mobile and expressive, and how others talk with their eyebrows; how the character of a man may be expressed in the way he lights a cigarette, and how the character of a woman may be expressed in the way she draws on her gloves. His ears will be even more busy, with the multitudinous sounds of town and country, the characteristic noises of a farm awakening to life in the early morning, or the varied rackets of Main Street during the Grand Army parade. He will know the tones of voice that go with different occupations—the velvet-iron tones of the section boss, the soft, middle-aged drawl of the carpenter telling stories to his working mate over the roof tree of a house, the smooth, dapper tones of the young man behind the silks and ribbons counter, the strident, nasal tones of the shop girl asking if her bundle hasn't been tied up yet. He will know the voices that go with age

and with sex, with education and without. He will know how differently the people in one part of the country will speak from those in another. He will study the inflections that belong with moods—the turns and stresses that mean sarcasm, doubt, jealousy, flattery, fear, remorse, petulance, hatred. He will collect the idioms of various occupations and classes and localities. All this he will do because he knows that when he begins to work on a play he must *hear* and *see* his people.

All these constitute what we may call the external data of character. They are the outward manifestations of the inward personality; but they are no more than that, and to know them alone would not, of course, mean knowing human nature. Nevertheless, they are the equipment of which the dramatist has most immediate need, the means by which he gives the persuasive air of real life to his creations. Without this knowledge of externals, his people will seem vague, or cold, or too much like one another.

The study of the inner personality is more fundamentally important, but not necessarily, I think, more difficult, because many people who have a natural aptitude for understanding motives and interpreting actions have little aptitude for noting and remembering the external aspects. The problem here is to know what people will do under various circumstances, what also they will feel and think. The first and paramount source of information is always oneself—that is the one personality which we know with any au-

thority. Every dramatist, like every novelist, draws heavily on his own inner experience, for the drama is not by any means the purely objective art that some people suppose. Outside oneself are family and friends whose behavior offers a rich field for study; and farther in the distance are the records of human actions contained in the newspapers and in literature.

These last resources should not be too lightly prized. The newspaper puts one in touch with a world of activity more varied and unusual than most of us know by experience. Every morning brings to our door a new catalogue of scenes from the great human comedy. Most of it we pass over indifferently, but here and there we come upon a phrase happily turned, or another full of unconscious character, or a touching figure, or an interesting incident. The press, I suppose, is more fruitful in suggestions for themes and situations than it is in the deeper education in the meaning of life. But literature can help us there, and does help us, more than often we realize. Literature is life at second hand, it is true, but it is life synthesized and explained; it offers a valuable glossary for our own reading of life, and tells us where to look for material, and how to look. A man who knew life only by reading about it would have, to be sure, but a pale sort of knowledge, so that we need to be turning constantly to life for confirmation and the freshening contact with nature. On the other hand, who has not learned to know life better by reading Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale*, or Mark Twain's

Huckleberry Finn, or the dialogues of Plato, or the stories of Ring Lardner? Literature opens our eyes to the meanings of life at the same time that it suggests ways of rendering life in art. As John Macy says: ¹

It is well for a writer to say: "Away with books! I will draw my inspiration from life!" For we have too many books that are simply better books diluted by John Smith. At the same time, literature is not born spontaneously out of life. Every book has its literary parentage, and students find it so easy to trace genealogies that much criticism reads like an Old Testament chapter of "begats." Every novel was suckled at the breasts of older novels, and great mothers are often prolific of anæmic offspring. The stock falls off and revives, goes a-wandering, and returns like a prodigal. The family records get blurred. But of the main fact of descent there is no doubt.

Plays, as well as novels, have their literary ancestry.

Young writers are usually advised to keep a notebook. The reason for this is clear enough: our memories are so undependable that first impressions fade quickly and are soon lost. Into the notebook should go cuttings from newspapers, jottings of 'character, speech, dress, incident, and notes of ideas. Sardou, the most methodical and indefatigable of dramatists, was accustomed to carry with him at all times his pocket memorandum book, into which he put whatever caught his eye or ear at the time the impression was

¹ *The Spirit of American Letters*, Chapter I.

made. These were often exceedingly slight—a word, a gesture, an attitude. In his library were some two hundred notebooks containing ideas for plays, some well developed, others still in the germinal stage and containing a newspaper clipping or a few scribbled words. The daily jottings were distributed among these notebooks as seemed appropriate, until in the course of time a few became ripe for composition. Then the serious, and equally methodical, labor of writing began.

2. *Human Nature versus Manners.* ✓

Character may be divided into two large aspects—the deep, common, permanent current of human nature which is the same for all degrees, occupations, and times, and the outward expressions of human nature, or manners. The dramatist must know both, and oftentimes the second gives him more trouble than the first. Our own inner experience and our intuitions will go far in helping us to understand the minds of people we have never known, but the peculiarities of expression we can know only by personal observation. The fact is, though, that the limited experience of most of us acts as a galling hindrance. How can we use thieves, or Lithuanian mill hands, or Kentucky mountaineers in our plays if we have never met any of these people? Or how can we deal with the manners of business—the slang of a newspaper office or of a stock-broker's office or of a foundry—if we have never been

in such a place and have only a vague notion of what goes on there? Some time ago, in conducting a class in playwriting attended mainly by clubwomen, I protested that the ideas they submitted lacked variety, in that they dealt exclusively with life in comfortable middle-class homes, and chiefly with relations between husband and wife; whereupon they replied in chorus that that was the only phase of life they knew. I was silenced effectually. Of course, as I rather lamely pointed out, the field of non-realistic, fantastic comedy is open to every one with imagination, but it happened that these women all wanted to deal with life directly.

There is nothing to do, as I see it, except to abide within one's limitations and work industriously at extending their boundaries. Any attempt to depict types which one knows only by hearsay is destined to sure failure. Our dramatic literature is too full as it is of anæmic criminals, laborers, and business men. Where the manners of class or occupation have marked characteristics, there you must either know or let alone. Whenever a student of mine is at sea for a subject and locale, I always inquire about his associations, and set him to work on the people he knows best. In one case, a girl brought to me a banal plot of a bridal couple in a city hotel, a sneak thief, a stolen necklace, and a detective. Within a few minutes I had learned that she knew nothing of thieves and detectives, but had lived for some years among the Russian-German farmers of western Canada and had

vivid impressions of their mode of life. So I suggested that she work on them, with the result that her play instead of being cold and artificial had more than a touch of vital warmth.

3. *Contrast.*

Success in characterization depends partly on right selection. One might compare the cast of a play with a team, the members of which will work well or ill together according as they are well or ill suited to one another. But whereas in a team coöperation depends mainly on agreement, in a play it depends quite as much on disagreement, or at least on contrast. In a play, as in nature, heat is generated from friction, the friction of one mind against another which excites it. This contrast does not have to be overt hostility, or indeed hostility of any kind, any more than a disagreement needs to be a pitched battle. It is not necessary, or desirable, to set your people snarling at each other like a pack of ill-natured dogs. But if they are all alike, all of the same class and the same temperament, they will merge into a flat, monotonous picture.

The principle of balance and symmetry, of which I have spoken in connection with action, applies here also. You can not have these qualities without using complement and contrast. Bernard Shaw, who is wise in all the tricks of his trade, scatters them throughout his plays with a liberal hand—sentimental and stupid Mrs. Warren against hard and clever Vivie; the

elderly and philosophic Cæsar against the young and primitive Cleopatra; the unsentimental, argumentative, radical John Tanner against, on the one hand, the conservative old fogey Ramsden, and, on the other hand, the emotional Octavius; Ann Whitefield, type of the scheming woman who uses her sexual charm, against her sister Violet, type of the scheming woman who uses her head and is in her own phrase "as hard as nails." *Candida* offers a perfect example of character balance, the two sentimental men, as far apart in temperament and experience as they can be, with Candida, clear headed and practical, poised between them. Shaw has found one contrast so very useful—i. e., between a keen, intellectual nature and a soft, muddleheaded one—that he has used it again and again. Indeed most of the brilliant clearness of outline of his pictures, comes from his hard, vivid contrasts.

A very great pleasure in reading any competent play comes from appreciating the artistic placing of the characters with respect to one another. A character here will be balanced by another there, the qualities lacking in one person will be made up by those present in another, a strident note at the right time takes away the danger of over-sweet concords. What pleasure it is to see the serene conformity of a circle of people shattered by the intrusion of some unruly personality! One of the most admirable things, technically, about Mr. Rudolph Besier's *Don*, seems to me the way in which a play which in the course of two acts concentrated on the same point of conduct is in danger of

going stale, is in the third act wonderfully toned up by the discordant entrance of Thompsett into the action. In short plays the picture-building problem is not so complex, but the principle of balance by contrast still applies, so that we have the beautifully complete picture, in *The Twelve Pound Look*, of the blatant and stupid Harry Sims, the crushed and stupid Mrs. Sims, and perfectly poised Kate.

But contrast is of value not simply for the artistic pleasure it gives, and for the young dramatist there is a use of more immediate importance. Contrast helps movement. The reason why so many amateur plays do not move, or move sluggishly, is that the people are badly picked. Mr. Wilde has shrewdly observed, in his *Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, that dialogue built on the exchange of "yes" and "no" moves, whereas dialogue built on a succession of "yeses" does not. The same observation applies to the people themselves. If they are people so created that they will always be agreeing with each other, the action will drag or stop dead; but if one nature strikes fire from another, then the air is tingling with movement. Bring such a person as Kate in the presence of Harry Sims, or such a person as Marchbanks in the presence of Morrell, and the sparks fly. There is no need here to whip a lazy mare; rather one needs to hang on to the reins to keep from being run away with.

Therefore, in working on the personnel of a play, the dramatist will give more than a passing thought to the question whether his people, in fulfilling other func-

tions, also are sufficiently different from one another to work well in concert.

4. *Emphasis.*

The point of view of the extreme realists in drama is that the people in a play should be exactly like the people of real life, whereas the traditional view, as expressed with most determination by the French critics, has been that dramatic characterization requires a heightening or strengthening of accents, else the character will seem pale on the stage. Without going into the æsthetics of this argument, one may safely say that very few people have passed from life to the stage without being touched up, strengthened in high lights and shadows. In farce, melodrama, and satire, these accents are heavy, but even in straight comedy and tragedy they are visible if you look for them. We might put it in this way, that the stage deals with exceptional people, people who wear their foibles and virtues with some distinction. To prove this, one need not go to dealers in high colors, like Shaw or Barker or Synge or Wedekind; one can prove it by such a sober realist as Galsworthy. Mrs. Jones, the charwoman in *The Silver Box*, is exceptional in her submissiveness, just as the two leaders in *Strife* are exceptional, and also the hero of *The Pigeon*. All the people in Stanley Houghton's *Hindle Wakes* are accented to bring out their particular notes. And so it is also with the charming,

lovable people of Barrie—Maggie Shand of *What Every Woman Knows*, Phœbe Throssel of *Quality Street*, Leonora the legendary, Mary Rose, Crichton the Admirable, and Kate formerly Mrs. Sims.

I might go on naming thousands of characters in the repertory of the stage from Æschylus to George Cohan, but to what purpose? Any amateur actor has gone through the experience of being made to "speak louder" and to "accent that business" until it seems to him that he is making himself into a combined megaphone and cartoon; but when he sits in the auditorium and watches his fellows rehearse, it begins to dawn on him that their muttered tones and indistinguishable gestures are precisely what he was doing and believed to be the very soul of nature.

So it is with characterization. Once and for all, accent is not caricature. It is the penciling and rouge that will, in the glare of the footlights, be softened to the picture that the artist wishes his audience to see.

5. *Logic.*

For the phrase "logic of character" we are indebted, I believe, to the French, who have talked about it a great deal in their critical writings. Their assumption is that although human character in life is full of inconsistencies, contradictions, and inexplicable flights, on the stage it should be always comprehensible; for otherwise, they say, it will seem only baffling. The business of literature is to explain life, to reveal hidden

springs of action, to complete equations. Here doubtless is debatable ground, where in fact the naturalists have taken issue and declared that character in literature should have the same broken lines that it has in nature.

The two parties are not, however, so far apart as they sometimes declare themselves to be. No dramatist of any school presents character as actually illogical or at least incomprehensible, and the naturalists are at great pains to show the inevitable relation of cause and effect. What they protest against is the reduction of characters to rigid, *a priori* formulæ, as when a dramatist adopts a questionable theory of conduct and so builds his characters that they conform to it with mathematical precision. They are all for imitating the infinitely complex interrelations of forces that act upon the man in real life—which is difficult in a long play, and impracticable in a short one.

The general necessities of concentrating and simplifying which are inherent in the confined space of a one-act play forbid much subtlety in characterization. There is no time to present the complete man; there is time only for one or two phases. The people of short plays are all quite simple. Thus Harry Sims, Maurya (of Synge's *Riders to the Sea*), Maggie Cather (of St. John Ervine's *The Magnanimous Lover*), Mary Trask (of Lewis Beach's *The Clod*), Countess Mizzi (of Schnitzler's play by that name), may actually have been people of considerable complexity in the full scope of their lives, but for the short glimpse we have of them

they are simple and easily understood. The test of thorough characterization in short plays, accordingly, is not that it shall embrace the whole personality, but that what we are allowed to see shall be sound. And it is made sound by being based on cause and effect.

Let your people do nothing that is inconsistent with the character that you have provided for them. Here is the simple rule governing logic of character. In life it sometimes happens that a girl of good family, carefully educated, plentifully supplied with the comforts of life, will, for no apparent reason, take to stealing from shop counters, or develop some other vicious trait. To her family and friends it is an inexplicable mystery, but the sociologist or psychologist knows that nothing happens without a reason, and that hidden somewhere in that girl's ancestry or early life there lurks the sufficient cause. Now if a dramatist is using such a character, he should know the cause, for he deals no more with mysteries than does the scientist. Yet time and again I have known inexperienced amateurs, and others who should know better, to make their people do underhand things for which there is no accounting whatever. A literary artist is not, after all, a perfectly free creator. When he has built a personality on certain lines he is bound to follow the course of development marked out by those lines.

Failure to observe logic of character results from two general causes. One is a carelessness which is allied to ignorance. Sometimes the young dramatist will make his people do inconsistent things because

he does not know better, or because he has not sufficiently reflected. In one case, a student of mine was writing a scene in which a young man fresh from an English college had joined his brother, who was a collector for museums working in Egypt, and the elder brother had been telling of certain transactions which he admitted were a little shady but which he justified on the ground that such things were done by all collectors; whereupon the young man, instead of expressing a gentlemanly distaste, broke out into expressions of puritan horror for which no preparation had been made. If there were need of it, he could easily have been pictured as a youth of peculiar moral delicacy, but he was not so pictured and his indignation consequently rang false.

The other cause of error lies in thinking more about plot than about character. This leads into all kinds of excesses, so that perfectly nice people are made to lie, steal, eavesdrop, slander, and otherwise violate their natures simply in order that certain things may get done. There is no excuse for this kind of thing; it destroys instantly our faith in the character and reduces the play to a false, mechanical tissue of events.

Let me repeat that logic of character does not mean adopting a hard system of demonstration. You can, and should, make your people free, supple, and varied, as they are in life. But every act of theirs should be plausible in that its relations to premises which you have established in their character should be unmistakably plain.

6. *Reversals of Character.*

An important application of the principle of logic has to do with changes or reversals of character, as when a person who is dominated by a passion or a prejudice at the beginning of a play is brought, by the succession of circumstances, to a quite opposite point of view at the close. The plausibility of these changes is frequently open to suspicion, but we know that they do occur in life, and they certainly occur frequently in long plays. For instance, Clyde Fitch's *The Truth* shows us a woman who is an incorrigible liar, but who is cured of her weakness in the course of four acts by certain bitterly chastening experiences. Hervieu's *Know Thyself* describes, in General de Sibéran, a man who is set in his opinion that every husband who discovers that his wife is unfaithful should put her instantly away, and then shows us how, under the revelation of such an affair in his own household, his obstinacy is shattered and he is brought to a more generous frame of mind.

A comparison of these two plays shows us an important difference, that in the first case we have to do with a fundamental weakness of character, whereas in the other it is only a matter of prejudice. Our knowledge of human nature tells us that a reversal or cure is far more likely with General de Sibéran than with Becky Warder. It is an artificial convention of the theatre which shows people undergoing a fundamental remaking of character in a short three hours' time.

If such a remaking is suspect in three hours' time, how much more suspect it is in half an hour! And yet it would seem that the young dramatist is bent on doing it. I have to argue continually with him that wives who have been driving their husbands frantic with their extravagance or their folly are not regenerated by the administration of a single lesson, or that fathers who have been tyrannizing for years over a rebellious family are not reduced to benevolence by discovering that their new daughter-in-law is a sweet girl. My advice is strictly to avoid all such miracles, or if it must be done, to do it as Mr. Percival Wilde has done in *The Finger of God*¹ by an actual miracle.

The only permissible reversal, as it seems to me, is that which concerns misconception or prejudice. People whose judgment is temporarily obscured by blindness, can be brought to a right mind by removing the cause. But even here we must be careful that the opinion which is to be changed be not too deeply rooted.

7. *Means of Characterization.*

I approach this subject knowing quite well that I can only skim the surface. The means of characterization are so varied and subtle that any attempt at a comprehensive catalogue would be a piece of mere fruitless pedantry. The place to go for the technique of characterization is dramatic literature, especially

¹ In *Dawn, and other One-Act Plays*.

the masters of character drawing—Schnitzler, Curel, Ibsen, Barrie, Chekhov, among the moderns, and Molière, Shakespeare, and Jonson among the ancients. An intensive study of *Professor Bernhardt* or *La danse devant le miroir*, or *The Admirable Crichton*, or *The Wild Duck*, or *The Cherry Orchard*—taking any one of these plays and studying the unfolding of character, step by step—will teach more than all the books of theory put together. What I have to say, therefore, is a mere glance at the outside, offering a starting-point from which the beginner can work.

Characterization may be, first of all, divided into two methods, according as it is *direct* or *indirect*. Direct characterization is that in which two people analyze and describe another person, or in which a person analyzes and describes himself. Indirect is that in which the sayings and doings of a person, without conscious intention on his part, reveal his character. The second is far more important, more truly dramatic, and much subtler, than the first.

Direct characterization is usually to be avoided as too patent and banal, but there are occasions where it is not only useful but necessary. For example, it may happen that the character of a certain person—or at least an important point of character—must be presented before he makes his appearance. This happens so often that it hardly needs illustration, but for a typical example I may point to Henry Arthur Jones' *Her Tongue*. Fred and Minnie Bracy have telegraphed their cousin, Patty Hanslope, to meet them at

Southampton in order to give a certain rich bachelor, who has been impressed by Patty at a brief meeting, a chance to propose before leaving for Argentina.

MINNIE. I wanted to give poor old Pat a chance.

FRED. She has muddled her love affairs terribly. You might just give Pat a friendly caution.

MINNIE. Her tongue? (FRED *nods*.) Yes, she does talk.

FRED. And never says anything! But look at her mother!

MINNIE. Oh, aunt's a downright horrid old bore!

FRED. And Patty's just as bad! Poor old Lorry!

MINNIE. Why poor old Lorry?

FRED. Fancy being out alone in the wilds of Argentina, and having nothing to listen to but Patty's tongue, for four or five years. (*Bursts into a roar.*)

A little later, and just before the entrance of Patty, the description is resumed, with emphasis:

FRED. Well, Patty can't say we haven't done our best for her!

MINNIE. If only she won't talk too much!

FRED. Yes, Pat's a good-looking girl; if she'd only hold her tongue, nobody would guess what a fool she is!

MINNIE. It was her terrible chatter that choked off George Moorcroft—he told me so himself.

FRED. Perhaps Lorry won't find her out—he'll only have half an hour.

This preliminary sketch serves to point the way in which the play is headed and to whet our appetite;

and then the real characterization of Pat is done indirectly by herself, through her flood of inconsequential chatter.

Direct characterization by the person concerned occurs often enough throughout drama, but on such different occasions that no rules can be suggested. Sometimes people talk about themselves as Anatol is always doing, because it is "in character" for them to do so; sometimes they do it simply because there is no one else to do it for them. Thus Barrie's Rosalind chats with Dame Quickly:

MRS. PAGE. (*Purring*) I am middle-aged, so why should I complain about it?

DAME. (*Who feels that only yesterday she was driving youths to desperation*) You even say it as if it was a pretty word.

MRS. PAGE. But isn't it?

DAME. Not when you are up to your knees in it, as I am.

MRS. PAGE. And as I am. But I dote on it. It is such a comfy, sloppy, pull-the-curtains, carpet-slipper sort of word. When I wake in the morning, Dame, and am about to leap out of bed like the girl I once was, I suddenly remember, and I cry "Hurrah, I'm middle-aged."

One should notice, however, that what we have here is not straight direct characterization, but direct characterization with its tongue in its cheek. We learn, later on, that this delight in being middle-aged is only one of Rosalind's many attitudes, half sincere and half laughing. I cannot recall that there is in

all of Barrie's plays a single piece of direct characterization pure and simple.

The pure and simple type may be illustrated by Galsworthy's *Defeat*,¹ a somewhat mawkish play written during the Great War. Here a young British officer has picked up a girl of the streets who happens to be a German, and the focus of the play is on the contrast between his hearty but shallow optimism and her bitter pessimism. The scheme of the play makes it necessary that they shall explain at length to each other their respective philosophies of life, that is to say, their respective characters.

The presence of much direct characterization in a play, whether concerned with oneself or with others, is accountable to two causes: either the dramatist is a psychologist, like Strindberg, interested in mental states too refined for the inexplicit mode of indirect characterization, or he is dealing, as Synge does, with introspective people naturally given to talking about themselves. In general, one expects to find explicit character analyses prevailing among dramatists of the psychological school, and less of it among those who treat life more objectively. But one should not fail to observe that in all schools the weakness people have for discussing themselves and others is used as an indirect means of revealing their own characters. Anatol, for instance, has occasional moments of clear-sightedness, but most of what he says about himself is to be heavily discounted. No better means of show-

¹ In *Six Short Plays*.

ing a man's conceit, or fatuousness, or stupidity, or any other kind of blindness can be devised than by letting him run on about himself, or his friends. One can easily call to mind notable cases in this kind: Anatol explaining how thoroughly he knows women, when in fact he is a baby in their hands; or Harry Sims expounding his advantages as a husband; or Christie Mahon building a romantic and wholly visionary picture of his heroism; or Torvald Helmer explaining to Nora how much wiser he is than she; or Hjalmar Ekdal flattered by beliefs that he is an inventor and a man of genius.

Upon indirect characterization, or the unconscious revelation of personality, drama rests as upon a cornerstone. Here the widest range of effect is possible, and here the wisdom of the dramatist in the ways of mankind is tested to the full. I do not propose to dwell didactically upon this subject, and shall content myself with calling attention to a few noteworthy instances of tactics which the student should supplement by constant reading and study. The first two are taken from Strindberg, who is a mine of information as to the exposition of character.

Adolph, in the play *Creditors*, has been explaining to Tekla, directly and truthfully, that she is a stupid woman who has taken every article of her intellectual equipment from him. I begin my quotation toward the close of his long analysis: ¹

¹ *Plays, Second Series*. Translated by Edwin Björkman. Page 221.

ADOLPH. And so you picked me for a scapegoat and doomed me to slaughter. But when you cut my thews, you didn't realize that you were also crippling yourself, for by this time our years of common life had made twins of us. You were a shoot sprung from my stem, and you wanted to cut yourself loose before the shoot had put out roots of its own, and that's why you couldn't grow by yourself. And my stem could not spare its main branch, and so stem and branch must die together.

TEKLA. What you mean with all this, of course, is that you have written my books.

ADOLPHE. No, that's what you want me to mean in order to make me out a liar. I don't use such crude expressions as you do, and I spoke for something like five minutes to get in all the nuances, all the halftones, all the transitions—but your hand-organ has only a single note in it.

TEKLA. Yes, but the summary of the whole story is that you have written my books.

ADOLPH. No, there is no summary. You cannot reduce a chord to a single note. You cannot translate a varied life into a sum of one figure. I have made no blunt statements like that of having written your books.

TEKLA. But that's what you meant!

ADOLPH. (*Beyond himself*) I did not mean it!

TEKLA. But the sum of it——

ADOLPH. (*Wildly*) There can be no sum without an addition. You get an endless decimal fraction for quotient when your division does not work out evenly. I have not added anything.

TEKLA. But I can do the adding myself.

ADOLPH. I believe it, but then I am not doing it.

TEKLA. No, but that's what you wanted to do.

ADOLPH. (*Exhausted, closing his eyes*) No, no, no—don't speak to me—you'll drive me into convulsions. Keep silent! Leave me alone! You mutilate my brain with your clumsy pincers—you put your claws into my thoughts and tear them to pieces!

This is masterly, in its union of direct and indirect characterization, in the way in which the primitive, tenacious mind of the woman is contrasted with the over-organized, neurotic mind of the man, and above all in the way in which this argumentative, expository passage is infused with passion and movement. It is character treated vitally, creatively, upon a basis of acute analysis.

A similar vigor informs the following passage from *The Father*.¹ The Captain is balancing his household accounts; Laura enters.

CAPTAIN. Thirty-four-nine, forty-three-seven, eight, fifty-six——

LAURA. Will you be kind enough——

CAPTAIN. Just a moment! Sixty-six, seventy-one, eighty-four, eighty-nine, ninety-two, a hundred. What is it?

LAURA. Am I disturbing you?

CAPTAIN. Not at all. Housekeeping money, I suppose?

LAURA. Yes, housekeeping money.

CAPTAIN. Put the accounts down there and I will go over them.

LAURA. The accounts?

CAPTAIN. Yes.

LAURA. Am I to keep accounts now?

¹ *Plays*. Translated by Edith and Warner Oland. Vol. I, p. 10.

CAPTAIN. Of course you are to keep accounts. Our affairs are in a precarious condition, and in case of liquidation, accounts are necessary, or one is liable to punishment for being careless.

LAURA. It's not my fault that our affairs are in a precarious condition.

CAPTAIN. That is exactly what the accounts will decide.

LAURA. It's not my fault that our tenant doesn't pay.

CAPTAIN. Who recommended this tenant so warmly? You! Why did you recommend a—good-for-nothing, we'll call him.

LAURA. But why did you rent to this good-for-nothing?

CAPTAIN. Because I was not allowed to eat in peace, nor sleep in peace, nor work in peace, till you women got that man here. You wanted him so that your brother might be rid of him, your mother wanted him because I didn't want him, the governess wanted him because he reads his Bible, and old Margaret because she had known his grandmother from childhood. That's why he was taken and if he hadn't been taken, I'd be in a madhouse by now or lying in my grave. However, here is the housekeeping money and your pin money. You may give me the accounts later.

LAURA. (*Curtsies.*) Thanks so much. Do you too keep an account of what you spend besides the housekeeping money?

CAPTAIN. That doesn't concern you.

LAURA. No, that's true—just as little as my child's education concerns me.

This is even better for illustrative purposes than the first passage, because the dialogue is more closely entwined with the daily life of the speakers—it is not,

like the other, pure dialogue without accompanying action. The action is as simple and natural as possible—that is the beauty of it—and yet it serves to give us the first sketch of the woman who is to play a dominant part and at the same time strengthens impressions that have already been made of the Captain. The reader will notice that in both cases we have “yes” and “no” characters with a vengeance.

Sometimes character develops slowly, by almost imperceptible increments; at other times it is revealed sharply, with one swift, telling stroke. An excellent instance of the latter method occurs in Mr. O'Neill's *Anna Christie*. We have been prepared for Anna's entrance, in the first act, by her father, the old Swedish barge captain, who has drawn a sentimental picture of his “Anna lilla” growing up into innocent girlhood on a Minnesota farm. Presently she enters the saloon that he has just left and sinks wearily into a chair.

ANNA. (*To LARRY, the bartender*) Gimme a whiskey—ginger ale on the side. (*Then, as LARRY turns to go, forcing a winning smile at him*) And don't be stingy, baby.

LARRY. (*Sarcastically*) Shall I serve it in a pail?

ANNA. (*With a hard laugh*) That suits me down to the ground.

No one who has seen Miss Pauline Lord in this play will forget that entrance—the weary girl with

the hard, defiant face, the cheap finery, and the whiskey voice. One saw in a flash the tragic gulf between the girl as her father imagined her and the girl as she was. Of course, the effect was heightened by surprise, the latter so well calculated that for a moment it took one's breath.

Where character is so simplified and accented that it has a dominant keynote, that keynote should be struck at the first entrance and maintained throughout the play. Most characters, I presume, have such a keynote, although it is not always so dominant as to be immediately perceived. As an expedient for presenting character quickly and plainly, and in cases where fullness of characterization is not important, the accented keynote is to be highly recommended. Miss Alice Brown uses it in her popular little comedy *Joint Owners in Spain*. Two troublesome old women in an old people's Home have driven their various room-mates to such distraction that as a last resort they are paired off together. Their commentary on this move presents with perfect clearness the simple lines of their characters:

MISS DYER. (*Tearfully*) Oh, what a world this is! There's some that's born to sow an' some that's born to reap. Here be I that never's had so much as you could put on a three-cent piece, an' there's Lizy Jane Fullerton marched off to a room where the sun lays all day long an' nobody knows who'll be packed in here along o' me. . . .

MRS. BLAIR. (*Entering in a wild dudgeon*) If I'd a-thought I'd ha' come to this, I'd ha' died in my tracks

afore I'd left my comfortable home in Tiverton Holler. Story-'n'-a-half house, good sullar, an' woods nigh-by full o' sarsaparilla an' gold thread an' pine. I've moved more times in this God-forsaken place than a Methodist preacher, fust one room an' then another; an' bad is the best. 'Twas poor pickin's afore, but this is the crowner. This beats all.

One "trick" which every dramatist has in his bag and which some one of them uses every now and then, is the use of character to illustrate a theory. O. Henry has a story of two journalists who are disputing as to how people really behave under stress of great emotion.¹ The one, a realist, insists that they express themselves, if they are articulate at all, in commonplace phrases; the other, a romantic, is all for the phrase whose eloquence fits the moment. By one of O. Henry's familiar feats of jugglery, they discover at the same moment that their wives have run away from them; whereupon at this practical test they rise to a perfect Q. E. D., only the realist unburdens his soul in a passionate, poetical period, while the romanticist can find nothing but the most banal exclamations. The method exemplified here has been used a good deal in drama, sometimes with results as crudely mathematical, sometimes with a subtler ingenuity. Mr. Alfred Sutro, in his clever play *The Man in the Stalls*, uses the same idea as O. Henry, with some difference. The husband, a dramatic critic bored with reviewing triangle plays of the French type, protests

¹ "Proof of the Pudding," in *Strictly Business*.

that their character values are false. "They always do the same thing. Husband strikes attitudes—sometimes he strikes the lover. The lover never stands up to him—why shouldn't he? He would—in real life. He'd say, look here, you go to Hell." But when, later on, he finds his own wife in her lover's arms he throws all his theories to the winds and rants like the most conventional of stage husbands. "Hector," cries his wife, choking with laughter, "Conventional situations! The usual stodge! The lover and husband! You goose, you wonderful old goose!" The particular twist which Sutro gives to the situation I shall not speak of now, because it does not concern the point I am making.

Another way of developing character by reference to a theory is illustrated in Barrie's *The Will*. Here the theme is that human nature, like the human body, is subject to diseases which, if untended, will spread and turn health into sickness, and the play shows in its three compact scenes how two happy young married people become hard and self-centered as time goes on until the kindly milk with which they were richly endowed turns sour. As a parallel illustration—a repetition for emphasis in another form—is told the story of an old clerk in the law office where the scene is laid, who is dying of cancer. The first scene closes with the following dialogue:

SURTEES. If I had been operated on long ago there might have been a chance.

MR. DEVIZES. But you didn't have it long ago.

SURTEES. Not to my knowledge, sir; but he says it was there all the same, always in me, a black spot, not so big as a pin's head, but waiting to spread and destroy me in the fullness of time. All the rest of me as sound as a bell.

MR. DEVIZES. It seems damnably unfair.

SURTEES. I don't know, sir. He says there's a spot of that kind in pretty nigh all of us, and if we don't look out it does for us in the end.

This subordinate illustrative theme recurs at the end of the play to reinforce the moral.

So far, in treating the means of characterization, I have spoken of dialogue alone, but the young dramatist should never forget that action, just as it is more vivid than speech, has oftentimes a power of characterization that no words can have. In a sense, action always accompanies speech through the by-play of facial expression, gesture, and movement, which come for the most part from the genius of the actor, and which may supply an eloquent running commentary on the words. But I am thinking of business written into the part. At this moment there comes to my mind the recent play of Kentucky mountaineers, *Sun Up*, in which a stoical old woman bids good-bye to her only son. So far as her words and outward demonstration go, he might be any one of the neighbors, but as she stands in her cabin door watching him down the road, her pipe drops suddenly from her mouth. No words could have told what that simple action told. Barrie depends a great deal on significant action for the revelation of charac-

ter, as, for a notable example, in the last pantomime scene of *The Old Lady Shows her Medals*, or at the close of the third act of *The Admirable Crichton*, where Crichton, reduced suddenly from king of an island state to butler, unconsciously brings his hands together with that washing movement which he had recently observed to be characteristic of menials. It is almost a dramatic cliché to mark an important decision by a bit of significant action. One recalls Pintero's Iris dropping Maldonado's cheque book into her travelling bag, or the girl in Eugene Walters' *The Easiest Way* tearing up her letter. Schnitzler, in the little play *Keepsakes*, uses effectively the contrast between dialogue and action. Anatol has been questioning Emily jealously about her past lovers and especially about two jewels which he suspects to be love tokens. She reassures him about one of them, in a long, rather quiet conversation, declaring that it is not a keepsake whose possession offers any kind of insult to her present love for Anatol. Then he takes up the other.

ANATOL. But what about this one?

EMILY. That?

ANATOL. Yes, the black stone . . . what about that?

EMILY. (*Taking it up with care*) Don't you know what it is?

ANATOL. It looks like a . . .

EMILY. It's a black diamond! (*Her eyes glitter as she holds it.*)

ANATOL. What?

EMILY. They're very scarce.

ANATOL. (*Hardly articulate*) Why . . . have you kept it?

EMILY. It's worth a hundred pounds.

ANATOL. Ah! (*He snatches the stone from her and throws it into the fire. She shrieks out savagely. . . .*)

EMILY. What are you doing? (*Then throws herself on her knees and snatching up the tongs does her best to rescue it. He watches her grimly for a little; the firelight makes ugly shadows on her face. Then he says quietly . . .*)

ANATOL. That was your price, was it? (*And he leaves her.*)

8. *Treatment of Subordinate Characters.*

Characters on the second plane, or minor characters, are usually not treated in such fullness of detail as those on the first plane. Part of the business of keeping them in the background is not to let them be too interesting, as they would be if they were at all complex. I see no reason why a minor character should not be vivid—for instance, a sinister criminal who may appear only for a moment—but he should always be simple. Some playwrights wash their subordinate figures almost out of existence by treating them conventionally, without marks of distinction, and this is certainly one way of putting them in their place. But I doubt if any one with a true flair for character could bring himself to the creation of puppets, no matter how insignificant they may be. Almost all of the second and third plane figures in Shakespeare are

endowed with distinctive personalities, and the same is true of Barrie. The young playwright may study with profit the ways in which this modern master of characterization so throws his lights that they shine full upon the principal personages, illuminating their whole character, and partially on the subordinates, so that only one or two points are revealed.

9. *Dialect Characters.*

Dialect is a useful handle for character. The dialect of negro, Irishman, Yankee, Swede, Yorkshire peasant, Lancashire mill worker, or of thief, long-shoreman, racing bookmaker, cockney seaman, Texas ranger, country club flapper, has in itself a characterizing power regardless of the personality of the speaker. It may be conventional and meaningless, as in the chatter of the ordinary stage Irishman, or it may express the soul of a race, as in the rich language of Synge's peasants. Dialect, too, has great advantages from the point of view of dialogue. But it is a thing which you either know or don't know, and if you don't know it you had better leave it alone; for the results of trying to "fake" it are almost always very sad. Even where it is pretty well done, but does not have the ring of sincerity, it leaves one feeling a little insecure. Much as I admire Mr. O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, I have never been able to take Mat Burke, the Irish stoker who falls in love with Anna, very

seriously, because I feel that his dialect does not have the accent of life, but is an echo of Irish idiom as it exists nowhere but in the plays of *Synge*. Dialect drawn from literature is always dangerous. Unfortunately there are a lot of people who, wrought up with enthusiasm for the peasant plays of the Abbey school, or Masefield's *Tragedy of Nan*, or like exotics, are possessed to write things of the same kind, with the direst results. And the British take their revenge in full whenever they introduce an American into their plays. I am still marvelling at the transcendent American who plays so prominent a part in *The Little Man*, a farce by that stern realist Mr. Galsworthy. I quote a few of his precious utterances:

Well! I judge a hero is just a person that'll help another at the expense of himself. Take that poor woman there. Well, now, she's a heroine, I guess. She would die for her baby any old time . . . I carry it further. I postulate we would all die for that baby if a locomotive was to trundle up right here and try to handle it. . . . In this year of grace 1913, the kingdom of Christ is quite a going concern. We are mighty near to universal brotherhood. The colonel here is a man of blood and iron, but give him an opportunity to be magnanimous and he'll be right there. Oh, sir! Yep.

After all, although farce is undoubtedly one of the arts of caricature, there must be *some* likeness to the original. That is one of the laws of caricature.

10. Non-realistic Character.

Thus far I have discussed character wholly from the point of view of realistic imitation, as though the sole aim of the dramatist were to draw people as they are in life; but many types of drama are not realistic at all, and consequently they make use of characterization of quite different modes. One might say that as soon as one begins simplifying and accenting character it ceases to be realistic, and strictly speaking this is true. But to speak thus strictly would result in confusing a subject that I wish to keep as simple as possible; so I will suppose that the realistic method holds for all plays which sound as though they might really have happened, whether they tell the exact truth about life or have what the French call the "illusion of truth," and speak of plays which do not pretend to have happened, plays of pure fancy.

One such type is the artificial comedy or farce comedy, a type cultivated much more by the English than by us. It is always sophisticated, and the grand archetype is Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In this play the rules of procedure are not, to be sure, presented for the first time in literature (they are all to be found, for instance, in the comedies and operettas of W. S. Gilbert), but they are so perfectly illustrated that every practitioner since Wilde has walked in his footsteps and tried to capture the same hard, tricky glitter. The principle of this kind of comedy is very simple—which does not mean that it is very easy. In

the first place, every drop of genuine sentiment is squeezed out of the characters and they are filled instead with the most dispassionate logic, not genuine logic of course, but a grave, absurd logic. Everything they do and say has the air of being governed by pure reason; and their reasoning has this relation to the reasoning of actual life, that it is exactly opposite. What these people do and say with such disarming gravity is always incongruous with what we should expect from them in real circumstances, and it is just this mixture of the incongruous with the unconsciousness of being incongruous that gives the peculiar savor to the humor. So far from being distinguished one from another by personal traits, these people are all cut from the same pattern and talk exactly alike. Consider the following love passage from *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

ALGERNON. I hope, Cecily, I shall not offend you if I state quite frankly and openly that you seem to me to be in every way the visible personification of absolute perfection.

CECILY. I think your frankness does you great credit, Ernest. If you will allow me, I will copy your remarks in my diary. (*Goes to table and begins writing in diary.*)

ALGERNON. Do you really keep a diary? I'd give anything to look at it. May I?

CECILY. Oh no. You see, it is simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication. When it appears in volume form I hope you will order a copy. But pray, Ernest, don't

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stop. I delight in taking down from dictation. I have reached "absolute perfection." You can go on. I am quite ready for more.

ALGERNON. (*Somewhat taken aback*) Ahem! Ahem!

CECILY. Oh, don't cough, Ernest. When one is dictating one should speak fluently and not cough. Besides, I don't know how to spell a cough.

ALGERNON. (*Speaking very rapidly*) Cecily, ever since I first looked upon your wonderful and incomparable beauty, I have dared to love you wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly.

CECILY. I don't think that you should tell me that you love me wildly, passionately, devotedly, hopelessly. Hopelessly doesn't seem to make much sense, does it?

(*Enter MERRIMAN.*)

MERRIMAN. The dog-cart is waiting, sir.

ALGERNON. Tell it to come round next week at the same hour.

The same sophisticated method is used by Stanley Houghton in *Fancy Free* and *Phipps*, by Arnold Bennett in *Polite Farces*, by Kenneth Sawyer Goodman in *Barbara* (a short play in the volume *Quick Curtains*), and by others, but rarely does one find it used with the ease, the *savoir faire* of Wilde. After him, they all seem a little strained, even a little vulgar. Consider, for instance, the following passage from Mr. Bennett's *The Stepmother*:

GARDNER. I say, Miss Feversham, were you ever in love?

CHRISTINE. In love? I have had preferences.

GARDNER. Among men?

CHRISTINE. No, among boys. Recollect I am only twenty, though singularly precocious in shrewdness and calm judgment.

GARDNER. Twenty? You amaze me, Miss Feversham. I have often been struck by your common sense and knowledge of the world. They would do credit to a woman of fifty.

CHRISTINE. I am glad to notice that you do not stoop to offer me vulgar compliments about my face.

GARDNER. I am incapable of such conduct. I esteem your mental qualities too highly. And so you have had your preferences among boys?

CHRISTINE. Yes; I like to catch them from eighteen to twenty. They are so sweet and fresh then, like new milk. The *employé* of the Express Diary Company who leaves me my half-pint at my lodgings each morning is a perfectly lovely dear. I adore him.

GARDNER. He is one of your preferences, then?

CHRISTINE. A preference among milkmen, of whom, as I change my lodgings frequently, I have known many. Then there is the postman—

Another type of non-realistic play embraces all those free fantasies so popular with the little theatre Bohemia—plays about disembodied spirits, plays about angels and devils, plays about Virtues and Vices, plays about people vaguely medieval, or vaguely Egyptian, or vaguely Arabic, or Persian, or otherwise Moham-medan, or early Christian. The attraction about such plays is, I suppose, that they leave the creative genius free from the trammels of the here and now; it can roam at will through real or imagined civilizations and

invent its own manners. Where such a mode of expression suits the genius of the playwright, we are given beautiful and original plays, like those of Maeterlinck and Lord Dunsany, and Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, and Anatole France's *Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*. In the hands of people of mediocre talent the mode becomes one of the minor bores of the theatre. For all cases the characterization is "ideal" in method, rather than "real"—that is to say, the character represents the dramatist's idea in an abstract, generalized way, without correspondence with any one who may have lived. Synge's *Deirdre* never lived anywhere but in Synge's mind; there is no attempt to "reconstruct" the primitive society of legendary Ireland. James Stephens' *Deirdre*, without being at all archæological, is far truer to the spirit of that society than is Synge's. But this does not mean that Synge has failed, because there is no attempt at realism; and he is as much the absolute lord over his subject which touches upon history as Maeterlinck is the absolute lord over his subject in *The Death of Tintagiles*, which is pure fantasy. All that we expect is a certain atmosphere, enough to suggest the times in which the play is supposed to move. That is what Dunsany gives us in his vaguely Eastern fantasies. A little color is all that the imagination needs to work on.

Now it is easy to see that in plays of this type complex characterization is to be avoided, because complexity inevitably brings us back to the realities of

life and thus jars upon the illusion. The characterization must be of the decorative kind, flat and picturesque, but without the fullness of life. It usually amounts to accenting the dominant passion, a passion which is harmonious in color with the tone of the play. Thus in Wilde's *Salomé*, where the dominant colors are sensuality and cruelty, these colors are dominant in *Salomé*, Herod, and Herodias. John the Baptist is painted all in one color, that of religious rapture. The Deirdre and Naisi of Synge, closer than Wilde's people to human experience, are nevertheless cut out of one piece, and express little besides undying faithfulness in passion. Dunsany's Queen in *The Queen's Enemies*, like most of his people, is a silhouette. The childlike simplicity of Maeterlinck's people has aroused equal admiration and derision. And so on.

CHAPTER VI

BEGINNING AND (END)

1. *Opening the Play.*

I propose in this chapter to deal with the relatively simple extremities of a play before coming to grips with the more troublesome interior. Of course the reader must not forget that every play is a separate problem, and that the right way of opening and closing it can be determined only by reference to its mood, purpose, and content; but at the same time there are certain general considerations which should be called to mind.

Mr. William Archer, in his book on *Playmaking*, divides openings and closings, into two kinds which he calls *legato* and *staccato*, according as they are slow and smooth or sudden and crisp. These are convenient tags which I shall take the liberty of borrowing. The first question to face is whether, on the whole, either kind is to be preferred in the one-act play.

If we bear in mind the limitations of time which confine the dramatist working with the short play, and the importance of wasting no time in securing the

spectators' attention, presenting the characters, and getting the action started, we should doubtless decide, *a priori*, for the *staccato* way. This is admirably exemplified in *The Twelve Pound Look*, where, as I have pointed out, the audience is thrown instantly, and in the most captivating fashion, into the spirit of the play. When active curiosity is aroused at the lift of the curtain, the battle is half won; and it must be a poor play which then relaxes its hold. The arguments in favor of such an opening are so plain that it is unnecessary to dwell on them—at least they are quite plain to any one who has had any experience in writing plays. But they are not always plain to the beginner, who for the most part is likely to be timid and hesitant in opening his play, so that I have found it desirable to urge the *staccato* method on him. When I say "urge," I mean that I do so simply as an antidote for his timidity, to discourage palaver and beating about the bush. If he feels that his play has made a good start, he is able to carry it along with greater confidence; and that is an advantage worth gaining.

At the same time, it is quite wrong to insist that the *staccato* opening is on account of its merits always to be preferred. As a matter of fact, the majority of plays open *legato*; nor do they suffer in point of interest on that account. The *legato* opening need not be dull—must not be dull. It may not give the little shock of surprise, the feeling of being flung boldly into the midst of action, but it can, by its own approaches,

lay hold upon the interest of the audience as surely and almost as quickly as the *staccato* way. For the beginner the trouble with it is that he does not know what these approaches are, and he fails to give them the vital touch which is necessary in an opening, of whatever kind. It is so fatally easy to be dull.

In contrast to the first scene of *The Twelve Pound Look*, consider the following dialogue, which opens Mr. Ridgely Torrence's play *The Rider of Dreams*.

The scene is the kitchen of a negro household. The mother, LUCY SPARROW, is sprinkling clothes at an ironing-board, while BOOKER, her young son, is perched on a high stool behind her.

LUCY. Who make you?

BOOKER. God. Ain't the mush done now?

LUCY. It's done but I ain't done wif you. You got to learn good befo' you eat good. Who redeem you?

BOOKER. Christ. I'll stop being hungry for it if I don't get it now.

LUCY. Bettah lose youah wishes an' youah ahms an' laigs an' everything youah body's fix wif an' keep youah immortal soul. Who sanctify you?

BOOKER. The Holy Ghost. I don't want nothing but mush.

LUCY. Well, you ain' goin' to git hit twell you luhns de questions. What de chief en' of man?

BOOKER. Chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy himself forever.

LUCY. (*Coming swiftly forward and confronting him with a threatening look.*) Enjoy hisself! I ain' neveh teach you dat. You know bettah 'n dat. Man got no right to

enjoy hisself. He got to enjoy Gawd. You knows dat as well as you knows eatin'. An' you got to say it an' what's mo' you got to live it. Now what de chief en' of man?

BOOKER. Enjoy God forever.

LUCY. Dat's mo' like it. (*She resumes her labors at the ironing-board.*) I'm raisin' you fo' de Kingdom an' you'ah goin' in de Kingdom ef pushin' 'll lan' you dere. Because dis time anutheh yeah you may be in some lonesome graveyard. (*Singing*)

In some lonesome graveyard,
Oh, Lawd, no time to pray.

(*As she sings BOOKER stealthily slips off his stool and going around to the opposite side of the table takes a spoon with which he approaches a dish set upon a warming-shelf fixed to the stove. He furtively dips his spoon in the dish and begins to eat, LUCY continuing her singing.*)

Play on youah harp, little David,
Little Davy, how ole are you?
"I'm only twelve yeahs ole."

(*She turns and discovers BOOKER.*) What! You stealin'? I'll show you! (*She gives him a cuff and a shake, depositing him again on the stool.*) You shorely is on de way to de fieh but I'm goin' to pluck you out ef it skins you alive. Steal, will you? What de sevenf commandment?

BOOKER. (*Sniveling*) Thou shalt not steal.

LUCY. See dat. You knows 't but you des won't live hit. Well, I'm goin' live it into you. I'm goin' slap sin out of you. (*She gives him a shake.*) An' de grace into you. Now you say dat commandment seventy times seven. Begin. Say hit.

BOOKER. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not steal——
 (*The door opens and MADISON SPARROW comes in.*)

MADISON. What de boy do?

Now this seems to me a beautiful beginning for a play, at least for this particular play—quiet, full of the placidity of everyday life, and yet engrossing from the start. In its own way the stage picture is as effective as that of *The Twelve Pound Look*, with the neat little kitchen, the serious, sweet-faced negro woman at her ironing-board, and the unhappy youngster perched on his stool.

No, one can not say that either the *staccato* or the *legato* opening is to be preferred. The sole determinants are that the opening shall properly strike the tone of the play, and that it shall awaken interest. Further than this in laying down the law we can not go. We hardly dare stipulate, for instance, that the opening lines shall state the theme or start the action. The scene just quoted from *The Rider of Dreams* does neither of these things, except that it prepares the way for them. It is really an introduction; for theme and action do not enter until Madison appears. Every now and then one finds a play which preludes in one fashion or another before the real work begins.

But undoubtedly it is sound advice to the young playwright to get under way at once, to sound his principal motif, as it were, in the opening bars. That is the normal way, and it is a good one. Not that he should be in a rush about it. He can go only so fast

as his audience will follow, and he must bear in mind that when the curtain rises the audience has many things to assimilate besides theme and story—it must give a considerable part of its attention to the stage set and to the persons who may happen to be visible. While it is doing that it naturally does not wish to concentrate on important things that are being said. Any long play should be so written that the first six minutes can be missed without any important loss, and any short play should be so written that the first two minutes can be similarly missed. One of the beauties of the opening of *The Twelve Pound Look*—where the stage picture is unusually startling—is that for a minute or two, while Harry Sims is strutting and kneeling, not a word is said. By the time Lady Sims speaks, we have taken the picture in and are ready to listen.

The following dialogue, written by one of my students, seems to me very good as the opening for a play.

The scene is the LAMPERTS' drug store in a small town. JAMES LAMPERT, a boy of sixteen, is behind the counter, sprawled over a newspaper. RALEIGH DIX, an elderly man, the town loafer and hypochondriac, is seated in a swivel chair.

JAMES. (*Excited*) Gee, Mr. Dix, here's the Rumble murder written up in the Chicago paper.

DIX. Read it, James. Read it!

JAMES. Woodville boy murders father. Angered by drunken threats of worthless parent, Johnson Rumble, 18,

yesterday shot and killed his father. Shooting was done with a ten-gauge, double-barrelled shotgun loaded with buckshot.

DIX. I'm glad Johnson gave him both barrels, the old skunk. A mighty good riddance, he is. He was just pure and simple no account.

JAMES. What do you think they'll do to the kid? Send him to jail for life?

DIX. Ho, ho, ho! (*Dryly*) I reckon not. The sheriff took him around and bought him the best cigar in town. He ain't even going to arrest him!

JAMES. He's sure lucky!

DIX. (*Rather vehemently*) So's the old man lucky. He's lucky to die. That's what he is. And the town's lucky he's gone. I'd like to die the same way. I'd be a good riddance too.

JAMES. You're just jokin'?

DIX. No I'm not jokin'. I'm serious.

JAMES. You don't want to die, do you, Mr. Dix?

DIX. I can't say as I enjoy livin'.

JAMES. Honest now? Why, you never have to work or nothin'. You ought to have a swell time.

DIX. (*Whining*) That's just it. I'm nothing to anybody. Nothing but a burden. I've got no people. I can't work. What is there for me? I want to die, I tell you, and I mean it.

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JAMES. Why *don't* you die then—that's what I'd do.

DIX. Young man, there's eternal damnation promised for taking the life of a human being. It's in the Good Book.

JAMES. But if you don't *want* to live, it looks like it'd be all the same to Jesus or whoever's in charge. You'd

get to see him sooner. (MR. DIX *shifts uneasily in his chair.*) You could take poison.

DIX. (*Reflectively*) I've a good notion to sometimes! I've a good notion to sometimes.

JAMES. I'm not in any hurry to see you gone, you know. But then——

DIX. (*Very seriously*) The Lord wouldn't abide me. No sir, he wouldn't abide me on the Golden Shore if I was to cut my own life line.

If we examine a little into the causes which make this something more than an average beginning, we see in the first place that the stage picture is good—that the homely drug store with the old man in the swivel chair and the boy behind the counter promises well. Secondly, the two people are easily and persuasively characterized—there is a natural simplicity of presentation which, so far as my experience goes, is very rare in the inexperienced young playwright, and all too rare among those who ought to know how it is done. Thirdly, the dialogue hits at once on a theme that always interests—murder or suicide—with all the gruesome elements extracted because of the innocent eagerness of the boy and the obvious hypocrisy of the old loafer. I am quite sure that it is the touch of authority in the characterization which gives the passage most of its charm. It communicates a little of that thrill which runs over us when we meet on the stage a veritable and unexpected bit of life. For my part, when I had read these opening pages they aroused in me keen anticipation of various possible developments

from the premises given—which is the most that any opening scene can be expected to do. Unfortunately, I am obliged to admit, the succeeding story, while it had its good points, fell rather far below these expectations. But that is another matter.

One useful kind of opening to bear in mind is that which depends on silent business, or pantomime. Silent action on the stage is always interesting, even when it is merely a servant drawing the curtains and turning on the lights at nightfall. Many plays, long and short, begin with an empty stage, a bell ring, a servant passing through to admit a visitor, then the return of servant ushering visitor, and the dialogue begins. There are very good reasons for beginning a play in this or some similar fashion. The audience, still rustling and therefore unable to hear well what may be said on the stage, and not yet in a state of attention, takes in readily with the eye, and has brought the ear to focus by the time the dialogue has begun. Then too, one can often suggest the atmosphere of the play in the business which is going on—the atmosphere of a busy office, or of a low dive, or of a quiet home. Lucy Sparrow, ironing in her clean kitchen, is herself a good opening for *The Rider of Dreams*, and an audience may be glad of a few moments in which to watch her deft handling of the clothes and to take in details of the room, before she asks her first question.

Silent openings are not all *legato*, as the previous paragraph may have implied. There can be no more *staccato* opening than the favorite device of two-gun

melodrama—an empty room, a noise at the French windows, the stealthy entrance of a suspicious figure, and a quick hiding in the grandfather clock just as the butler comes in. Another *staccato* effect is given by the angry entrance—as the curtain rises a man, or woman, enters the room tempestuously, walking about in a state of evident nerves and perhaps, if it is to be *very staccato*, hurling a piece of a bric-a-brac on the floor. A very decent play written for me which dealt with a negro family during a race riot, showed, on the rise, a disordered room and a frantic negro woman packing her movables in bed sheets, darting occasionally to peer through a window in the direction of a hoarse murmur, and whimpering with terror. This lasted for a minute or so before the second character entered, and it was a good opening of the *staccato* kind.

As to that favorite device of opening a play, the telephone, I have only one thing to say, that if ever there was a lazy man's resource, this is it.

To conclude, that opening is best which makes us glad the curtain has risen. How this is done matters little, but if one compares the plays which open exceptionally well, he will find that the cause, as in all the good things of playwriting, rests more often on character than on anything else. Good characterization is always the best of openers. Not every good play opens with a bang; not every good play, in fact, excites immediate interest—in many cases the interest is deliberately led from a state of indifference to higher and higher degrees, as in Schnitzler's *Literature*, a

little masterpiece. The dramatist can always count on the audience's good will and patience to get him past his expository scenes. But I should advise the young dramatist not to rest too confidently on that patience, but rather to keep before him the idea that he must win over an audience which is sceptical or at least indifferent. As I have said before, a good start is a battle half won.

2. *Closing the Play.*

If speed is not always a desideratum of the opening of a play, we can with more confidence affirm it to be a desideratum of the close. The reasons for this are patent. I have before now compared the one-act play with a single sharp hammer stroke, in contrast to the long play which makes a number of strokes. Now the maximum strength of the blow is felt at the climax, that is to say, near the end; and in order not to muffle the force of the blow the play should end thereafter as quickly as possible. A play which, without good reason, drags on after the crisis is past defeats its own end and gives an impression of lameness, even of indecision. Anticlimax, except in rare cases where it is cultivated for a purpose, is one of the things which a dramatist wishes to avoid. Therefore he may take his reasonable time about getting started, but his manner of ending is a matter of getting out of his own way as quickly as possible.

A play whose crisis comes at the very end has no

problem of this sort to solve. Such plays are rare, but they do occur. One of my students wrote a play whose action turns upon the decision of a rising young lawyer to accept the nomination for district attorney, with the prospect of governorship ahead. His natural eagerness to accept is very much offset by the facts that he is being backed by a notorious boss who makes it plain that he expects service from his candidate, and that there is a shady transaction in the young lawyer's past which the boss half guesses at. His shady past—a woman, of course—appears on the scene to threaten disaster, but before she can do any harm she is killed. Whereupon the ministerial leader of the Good Government League exhorts him thus:

“Young man, now and here in the presence of the sacred dead, can you refuse to consecrate yourself to the work before you? This woman, if asked what it was that she most desired in life, would very probably have answered, to use the vulgar term, ‘a square deal.’ Consecrate yourself to giving these outcasts a chance at a ‘square deal.’”

And the young lawyer, keenly alive to the irony of his situation, replies:

“Gentlemen—if I must—I accept the nomination!”

The play stops here, of its own accord, because there is nothing more to say. Occasionally one finds plays which march with like directness to a wall-like end, and among them the most notable example is certainly Yeats' *Cathleen-ni-Houlihan*. Here is a play which, until the very end, is not especially dramatic—

is, in fact, more lyrical in nature. An Irish family are talking before the evening fire, of this and that, of money and of marrying. Then enters an old woman—the spirit of Ireland herself—who sings to them of the sufferings of Ireland and her need of young fighting men, until the eldest son, giving up bride and family, leaves to join the rebels. So the old woman, her work done, leaves too, and shortly after the younger brother comes in. “Did you see an old woman leave this house?” the father inquires. “No,” says the young man, “but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.” Well, for my part, I can never read this line without feeling the same thrill that went over me when I saw the Abbey company present the play. It was superb.

Most plays, however, do not march thus straight to their climax at the very end, but have to be rounded off; and this rounding off frequently causes exquisite trouble.

The usual way out is to find a secondary climax, which can be compressed into a single pointed speech. For this purpose a subordinate theme, or a development of the main theme, is held in reserve. Here, as in so many things, *The Twelve Pound Look* offers a classical example. The real subject of the action is the meeting of Harry Sims and Kate, and the important focal scene of the play is given over to this. But the subordinate theme of Mrs. Sims has been set going early in the play when she is talking with Kate about typewriters, and it has been given definite form to-

ward the end of Kate's talk with Harry when she warns him to beware of the "twelve pound look" in his wife's eyes. Therefore after the big scene is over and Kate has left the house, we are prepared for the secondary climax on which the curtain descends—Mrs. Sims' timid query as to "how much those machines cost."

Mr. Lewis Beach's *The Clod* offers another well known instance of the accented curtain line. The crisis of the play comes when Mary, driven beside herself, takes down the shotgun and murders the two southern soldiers. Then quiet succeeds with a relaxation of tension, during which Mary picks up the fragments of her one china cup, for which she has just killed two men, and mutters: "I'll have to drink out of the tin cup tomorrow." Now this play might have ended at the shooting, just as the Barrie play might have ended with the exit of Kate, but then both plays would have seemed unfinished. The right mode of rounding them off is found in either case by a statement of the point of the play expressed dramatically (i. e., not through explicit exposition) in a single speech.

Stanley Houghton's artificial comedy *Fancy Free* is built on the geometrical situation that Fancy, eloping from her husband with Alfred, and the husband Ethelbert, taking a marital vacation with Delia, find themselves all at the same hotel. Of course, they meet, with elaborate explanations in the unemotional, pseudo-logical tone of which I have spoken in connection with artificial comedy, and Ethelbert explains to

Fancy how he met Delia. He had picked up her handkerchief as they sat at adjoining tables in a restaurant, and she had said: "Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes." Eventually Fancy decides to keep Ethelbert and goes off with him. That leaves Alfred and Delia alone. What is to be done now? The play seems to have come to an end, but we still have not reached a point at which it can, gracefully and epigrammatically, end. The problem is solved by a *reprise* of the line casually but so carefully planted in the middle. Alfred and Delia are sitting facing each other. They look straight at each other for a time. Then Delia, leaning forward: "Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes."

Technically ingenious? Very. It is just the symmetrical touch that is needed to round off this artificially symmetrical comedy.

Now if we observe these three endings we see that they give a certain twist to the play which might be called epigrammatic, although they are not epigrams, or anything at all like it. They are not in themselves, apart from their content, at all clever. Their appropriateness comes from the fact that they blossom naturally on the stem of the play. That is, they are dramatic. One might end a play by pasting an epigram to it, and certainly there can be no objection to that if the epigram is good and bears its proper relation to the theme. But the value of the closing line, when it is accented, never lies in a shallow witticism, but in

the way in which it suddenly illumines character and underscores the idea.

Such verbal endings are more suitable for comedy than for tragedy, and in any case I would not give the idea that they are a necessary thing. Many plays end quickly but emphatically, in others the emphasis is more on what is done than on what is said. Sometimes they even end slowly, on a deliberate *legato*—or we might say, keeping to musical terms, that they end *diminuendo*.

Such an example is offered by Schnitzler's *Episode*. I have elsewhere detailed the plot of this play, so that I need not give it here. Anatol, deeply offended that Bianca does not remember him, has gone away in a huff, leaving Max and Bianca. These two talk for a few moments about him, then turn to their own affairs. Max settles her in an armchair, and himself in another beside her.

MAX. Bibi—don't quarrel with *me*. Let's hear about the fellow in St. Petersburg, who's as like him as two peas.

BIANCA. Don't be absurd.

MAX. Or anything you like. I'll tell you how to begin.

. . . Once upon a time there was a big, big city. . . .

BIANCA. And into the city came a big, big circus. . . .

MAX. And in the circus there was a tiny, tiny girl.

BIANCA. Who jumped through a big, big hoop.

MAX. Now we're getting on. And in the box every evening. . . .

BIANCA. Yes . . . in a box every evening there sat a very good-looking man. . . .

MAX. Quite so . . . and then?

(*They settle to their friendly chat.*)

And so the play fades out. It did not *have* to be done that way—you can not demonstrate the rightness of it; but you feel that it *is* right, and very charming.

Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* also ends quietly. Dan Burke, suspecting his wife with a young neighboring farmer, Michael Dara, "lets on to be dead" in order to trap her, and then drives her out of his house. When she has left, after unburdening her mind eloquently on the miseries of living with him, Dan stops Michael, who is slinking after her.

DAN. Sit down now and take a little taste of the stuff, Michael Dara. There's a great drouth on me, and the night is young.

MICHAEL. And it's very dry I am, surely, with the fear of death you put on me, and I after driving mountain ewes since the turn of the day.

DAN. (*Throwing away his stick*) I was thinking to strike you, Michael Dara, but you're a quiet man, God help you, and I don't mind you at all.

(*He pours out two glasses of whiskey and gives one to MICHAEL.*)

DAN. Your good health, Michael Dara.

MICHAEL. God reward you, Daniel Burke, and may you have a long life and a quiet life, and good health with it.

(*They drink.*)

Now this scene, technically anticlimactic, has its definite purpose, which is to bring the play back from

the emotional level it has reached to the plane of quiet daily life, and to offer, as the last picture, a contrast between the two prosaic men and the high tempered, passionate woman who is tramping the stormy roads.

Sometimes plays end, as they sometimes begin, with silent action. As an example of a rather extreme case, I quote the concluding directions from George Middleton's *Madonna*:¹

GILBERT reaches over to her, she lifts her lips to his, but he gently lowers her head and kisses with infinite reverence, her hair. She lifts her head, a wonderful smile of spiritual love lighting her eyes. They look at each other firmly. He turns to LEE, offers his hand. LEE hugs him. GILBERT tries to speak, but cannot. He turns, halts before the Madonna a second, and then exits. DONNA crosses to LEE. He takes her in his arms. She is very calm now. She leaves him, and with a look of emulation, proudly flung to the picture, she crosses and slowly goes off. LEE is alone. He staggers a moment as though seized with heart trouble. He recovers with effort. He puts out the lights, closes the door, fastens the windows, pulls down the shades, cutting out the moonlight and leaving only the firelight and a single candle to light the room. He takes this one candle and holds it high above the Madonna. He half murmurs before it. The clock strikes ten slowly, and he stands there motionless, like some shadow, lost in memory.

I submit this as an example of what can be done, rather than as a subject of imitation. The business is too long, and too intricate. The last picture has at-

¹In *Embers, and other One-Act Plays*.

mosphere, but much of what goes before will be lost to most of the audience. It impresses me as being written by a man with more literary sense than stage sense. If the play is to close with pantomime, let it be short and pointed.

My closing advice on the ending of a play is, like my closing advice about the beginning, that the right ending is the one which fits the play—which sounds very much like begging the question. But without becoming too categorical, I may add that as little time should be spent between the climax and the curtain as possible, and that one always effective means of rounding off the play is to close with an accented, but not argumentative, statement of the theme.

CHAPTER VII

GETTING UNDER WAY

1. *Exposition.*

In every play, no matter how simple, there are certain explanations to be made at the outset which are technically known as exposition. More strictly speaking, exposition refers to explanations of things which have happened before the curtain rises, and which we must know in order to understand the action of the play. But I shall use it in a looser sense as including not only that, but all statements of fact, identification of persons and places, and everything else that must be explained before we can fully understand what the play is about.

Thus in Stanley Houghton's *Fancy Free*, for example, the exposition tells us who the four people are and what they have been doing—that Ethelbert and Fancy are married, that Alfred is their friend with whom Fancy is running away, that Ethelbert is also at the hotel with Delia, whom he has picked up in a hotel in Edinburgh. This is a more than usually heavy load for a short play, but some of them carry even more than this. The weight of past happening in *The Twelve Pound Look* is considerably greater, and

most of Schnitzler's more serious one-act plays—for example *Living Hours*—bear heavily on the past. The problem of exposition in such cases becomes deeply involved in the problem of development. Let us turn our attention first to simpler cases.

Plays such as Miss Alice Brown's *Joint Owners in Spain*, Lady Gregory's *The Workhouse Ward*, and Mr. Henry Arthur Jones' *Her Tongue* present the problem of exposition in its least complex phase. In each case there is a simple story which begins by answering the simple questions: "Who are these people, and what is the situation they are in?" Miss Brown must tell us: (1) that the action takes place in a home for old women; (2) that Miss Dyer and Mrs. Blair have driven all their roommates to distraction, the first through her whining and the second through her bullying; and (3) that the matron has as a last resort determined to put them together. Lady Gregory's problem is similar, but more simplified. She must tell us: (1) that the scene is a workhouse; (2) that the two old bedridden men before us are hopelessly cantankerous. Mr. Jones has the most to tell: (1) that the scene is a hotel at Southampton; (2) that Mr. and Mrs. Bracy have come there to bid farewell to Walter Scobell, sailing within a few hours' time for the Argentine; (3) that Scobell has shown an interest in their friend Patty Hanslope; (4) that in the hope of making a match they have telegraphed Patty to come to Southampton; (5) that Patty has lost more than one chance at marriage because of her incessant

talking, and that they are much worried lest she miss this one.

In all these cases, particularly in *Joint Owners in Spain* and *Her Tongue*, the preliminary explanations are cleared out of the way at the beginning of the play, before the real action sets in, so that the play divides into a section that is purely expository and one that is occupied with development. Let us see how it is done.

Mr. Jones begins with a very short scene of a hotel waiter showing the Bracys into a private sitting room.

WAITER. How long would you require the sitting room, sir?

FRED. Only an hour or so. My friend is leaving on the *Dunstaffnage*—what time does she sail?

WAITER. At two o'clock. Will this room suit you, sir?

FRED. Yes, this will do. When my friend comes back ask him to come here.

WAITER. Yes, sir. (*Exit.*)

The effect of this is to place us so that we know in a general way where we are—that we are in a hotel sitting room in a seaport town, that a friend is to sail at two, and that it must now be about noon. The succeeding dialogue, of little more than a page, tells us of Scobell's interest in Patty and of Patty's weakness. Then Scobell enters, and in the next page and a half we learn something about his character and circumstances and a few more details about his intentions regarding Patty. He is got rid of by a convenient er-

rand at the steamship wharf, there is half a page more about Patty's tongue, and then the lady herself arrives. At this point the action may be said to begin, because all the necessary information has been given; but as a matter of fact the succeeding scene between Patty and the Bracys may be included in the exposition, because its primary purpose is to reënforce, by vivid illustrations, what we have been told about her.

All this is very workmanlike, without being in the least inspired or having even the charm of ingenuity. The problem which exposition always raises is to avoid dullness and a too obvious giving out of information. The play must *seem* to be under way when as a matter of fact it is still manœuvring for a clear course. Mr. Jones uses straightforward methods, expecting to hold his audience by the intrinsic interest of what he has to tell us and by breaking up his dialogue to avoid monotony. He could very well have brought Scobell in with the Bracys, but he knew that a sense of movement would be gained by keeping him back for a few minutes, then bringing him on and taking him off again. The arrival of a fresh character is always revivifying. There is much to be said for thus boldly attacking exposition and finishing it off. It puts everything in order, clears the decks for action, so that we know precisely where we stand and what to expect. It has none of Barrie's charm, or Schnitzler's wit, or Dunsany's glamour; but it does its business.

Miss Brown, however, knowing that the principle of opening *in medias res* is as good for drama as it is for

epic, begins her play with an illustrative episode. The scene is Miss Dyer's room, and Mrs. Fullerton, the last of a series of failures, is being moved out. She stands quavering on the threshold, asking if one and another of her precious belongings has been taken, while the guilty party moans by the window in her rocking chair. Then upon the exit of Mrs. Fullerton, the matron remains behind for a short, definitely expository scene in which she plainly tells Miss Dyer, and us, what the trouble is with her, and that Mrs. Blair is to be moved in. The action begins with the entrance of the other culprit. It will be noted that although much is said, and shown, of Miss Dyer's temperament in this first section of the play, nothing is said about Mrs. Blair except that she is as cantankerous in her own way, and that the two women "ain't no more alike than chalk's like cheese." The reason is that Mrs. Blair is her own best exposition. The expedient of a preliminary scene of action, before the real exposition, should be kept in mind for possible use.

The object of good exposition is to be clear and unobtrusive. Clearness comes first, and if I were driven to choose between a play which opened in a humdrum fashion but with precision and one which opened charmingly but mistily, I should vote for the first. I grant that it is Hobson's choice, and I have said elsewhere that we can excuse almost every fault in a play but dullness. Yet a few moments' dullness at the outset—no, not actual dullness, for I could not tolerate

that—but say, *prosaicness*, will not harm a play if the rest is good and we feel that we are being rightly lined up. But exposition *must* not be really dull. It will not be if, instead of being flung in our face all at once, it is allowed to leak out, rapidly but gradually—the large, general facts first, the smaller details later as we begin to feel on more intimate terms with the characters. Bright dialogue, dialogue which gives one a sense of people really living with each other and not lecturing to each other, dialogue broken by movement on the stage, so that the subjects of conversation shift, and change, and return upon themselves, particularly dialogue which offers enticing glimpses of complications to come—these are some of the ordinary means of stimulating curiosity where there is fear that it may sink under the cold weight of exposition. And there are special devices, such as the playwright's ingenuity can invent.

Barrie, who loathes being humdrum, is rich in these special devices. I shall mention two, the first from his long play *The Admirable Crichton*. Among the premises upon which the play rests are these two: that Lord Loam, a very great aristocrat, has a theoretical belief in the equality of all classes, and that Crichton, his butler, has a practical horror of such equality. Any competent dramatist could have given us these two facts clearly enough in a brief dialogue, but no one but Barrie could have invented the delightful scheme of proving it by actual illustration—I mean the yearly ceremony at which Lord Loam in-

sists on having all the servants in to tea on terms of perfect equality. That exquisite episode is the gem of the first act. Only less ingenious is a device he uses in his three-scene playlet *The Will*. There the problem is to explain the purpose for which a certain newly married couple have made an appointment with their lawyer—a plain matter of drawing up their will. But Barrie makes a great to-do about this exposition. He supposes that young Mr. Devizes, just out of college and very sure of himself, has been given the case to handle and has accidentally burned the letter of appointment before it was opened; that he is too much ashamed to confess this to the visitors; and that he undertakes to ferret out their intentions by his own acumen. Of course he goes completely wrong, heads off on the assumption that they have come for divorce, nearly ruins the case, and has to be pulled out of his hole by his father. It is all very amusing; it gives us a chance to know the young couple that we would not otherwise have had, and unless we are particularly alert to such tricks we quite fail to see that the purpose of this charming scene is to give us certain cold facts.

Sometimes it happens that the antecedent facts are all in the possession of one person, and must be communicated to another person; and they may be so full of circumstance that they amount to a story. The usual way of handling this is to break it up into question and answer, so that the story comes out in dribbles in the course of an animated conversation. Such is the method used by Mr. Galsworthy in *The First and*

the Last.¹ Larry Darrant comes to his brother Keith, an eminent lawyer, to tell him that he has killed a man. He is too unnerved to give a straight story, so that Keith is obliged to draw it from him by an extended cross examination, which is further diversified and rendered passionate by Larry's highly emotional state and Keith's disgust and fear for his own reputation. There is no danger, with these methods, of the exposition going cold. But with proper safeguards the playwright need not fear a straightforward, unbroken narrative. In fact I have observed many times that when one character says to another: "Listen to me. I have something important to tell you. Two years ago, at a little watering place on the Brittany coast I met this girl Natalie . . .," the audience immediately pricks up its ears and prepares to give close attention. A connected narrative, then, is not necessarily soporific—in fact, theatre-goers of fifteen years ago will recall the long monologue which constituted the show piece of that forgotten spectacle *The Garden of Allah*, in which the hero recounted his past life for a full five minutes, at the top of his voice. But such a narrative in a one-act play should be made as short as possible, and it may well be broken by a question or two which will keep us in mind of the auditor on the stage. And *in no case* should the play open with such a passage. For the first minute or two, as I have said before, the audience gives but a divided attention to the dialogue, which should have movement but not

¹ In *Six Short Plays*.

weight. After it has settled down to attention, the playwright may safely venture to launch his narrative.

The expository prologue, and other forms of direct, undisguised exposition, belong to fantasies and poetic plays, that is, to all types which make no pretense at realism. Mr. Stuart Walker makes charming use of the prologue in *Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil*, and Edna Millay, in her *Two Slatterns and a King*, imitates the self-conscious technique of the medieval morality by having her people explain themselves as they come on. Such reversions to an antique style of writing delight us in plays like these, where everything is for fancy and nothing is real, but in a play written in the modern manner, I scarcely need to point out, they would be quite out of the picture.

So far I have been speaking of exposition localized in the forepart of the play, which is the simplest type. Often, however, it is not so localized, but runs through the whole, or the greater part, of the play. This happens when the story is heavily involved in past action. Let us take one of the least complex instances of this kind, Mr. Alfred Sutro's *A Marriage Has Been Arranged*.¹ In this superficial but clever little comedy the whole action consists of a man's proposal of marriage to a woman, her refusal, and her eventual acceptance. The woman is Lady Aline de Vaux, a poor aristocrat in her ninth season, desperately in need of a husband, and the man Harrison Crockstead, a wealthy, rough-mannered commoner. The theme is the triumph

¹ In *Five Little Plays*.

of character over prejudice. He begins by telling her of the one real love affair in his life, adds that he can not pretend to love another woman as he loved that one, and offers his hand. She counters by telling of the one real love affair in her life, adds that she can never love any man as she loved that one, and refuses him. He persists, relating more details of his past life, to which she replies with details from her own, until by degrees a mutual respect grows, which leads to another proposal and acceptance. Here the antecedent action has no direct bearing on the present action, in the sense that it produces consequences, but it is all important for the illustration of character, and much of the dialogue throughout the play dwells on it. Obviously in this case there would be no way of clearing off those explanations at the outset. They really *are* the play, instead of being the premises of it.

The Twelve Pound Look also draws heavily on the past, and a large part of each scene, up to the very last, is involved in what might technically be called exposition. The first two scenes (between Harry and Mrs. Sims, and between Mrs. Sims and Kate) are mainly expositions of character. We hear nothing of the past life of Harry and Kate—in fact we do not even know of their relation—until Harry's return to the stage. Then most of the talk of the big scene turns on it.

Schnitzler is particularly fond of themes which cover a wide space of time, with the result that much of his dialogue is concerned with the past. His bril-

liant comedy *Literature*, for example, deals with his favorite theme of the past which returns to annoy the present. Margaret, a divorcee and a literary Bohemian, is engaged to Clement, a patrician, who is exceedingly strait-laced (where his wife is concerned) and insists not only on her severing all connections with Bohemia but on her giving up her writing. He is very uneasy about her past and questions her endlessly about it. Then the object of his particular jealousy, a man with whom indeed she had once lived, pays her a visit. She confesses to him that she has written a novel about their relations and has included the love letters which they had exchanged; he tells her in turn that he has also converted their affair into fiction and has printed the same letters. Here is a dilemma, which the quick-witted Margaret solves by sacrificing her literature to her love, burning her novel before Clement's admiring eyes, and with this grand gesture of renunciation, throwing herself on his breast. Here the things that happened a year or more ago are so much richer in circumstance and more complex in relationship than the things which happen on the stage, that the dialogue is largely concerned with them.

It is clear that in plays like these no principles can be laid down as to the presentation of antecedent action. The problem of its presentation becomes the whole problem of the play. The most that I can do is to warn the beginner away from such themes. He had better wait until he gains something like mastery over his materials before he ventures upon them.

What he will find himself involved in, if he ignores this advice, is a double action, past and present, which must be carried on adroitly so that they move in harmony and do not get in each other's way. The moment the sense of present movement drops—the moment we cease to be interested in *what is going on now*—the play is stalled; and this juggling of two actions is by no means easy. A student of mine recently wrote a play about three women—an aunt and two nieces—who were going over family papers after the death of the girls' father. What came out of the dialogue was a great deal about their past life and a passionate resurrection of the father's sins. What had happened by the fall of the curtain was—nothing. It was very capably handled from the point of view of character and family life; but it was not a play.

2. *Preparation.*

When Delia, in *Fancy Free*, leans toward Albert at the end of the play and murmurs: "Do you know, you've got the most delightfully wicked eyes," it comes to us in the audience as a delightful stroke of wit, the very thing to end the play with, and we say, as we applaud, "How clever!" But we would not have thought so at all if the way had not been cleared to it by planting the same speech earlier in the play. Without that preparation the closing speech would have fallen quite flat; with it, it gains brilliance. So it is with all the high lights of a play—the laughs, the thrills, the effec-

tive turns of situation and dialogue—they have to be prepared for. The first signboard pointing to Mrs. Sims' famous query about the cost of "those machines" is planted away back in the second scene of the play, and lest there be any possible mistake, another in large, plain lettering is placed just before Kate's final exit—that is, as near the goal to which it points as possible.

One may object at this point that surprise effects do not depend on preparation, and in fact must of necessity avoid it. In reply to this I would grant that there is a type of mystery play which seems to depend on principles of bewilderment; but I would also insist that the best surprises are always carefully prepared for. Part of the pleasure of a surprise lies in recognizing its logicity, and in confessing that if we had been more alert to certain hints which we now recall, we would not have been taken by surprise. Therefore, since I am not writing with a view to the special tricks of mystery plays, I feel safe in saying that there are no exceptions to the rule that in a play almost every turn of its supple and manifold movement must be prepared for.

Kinds of preparation may be divided, for convenience, into preparation for action, preparation for character, and preparation for dialogue.

Preparation for action. When Mary Trask in Mr. Lewis Beach's *The Clod* becomes for a moment a homicidal maniac, she snatches her husband's shot gun from the wall and fires both barrels. Now the gun has been hanging in full sight on the wall from the begin-

ning, so that no particular explanations are needed as to how she came by the weapon at that particular time. But Mr. Beach is not content with this uncertain visual preparation; he creates an opportunity for Thaddeus early in the play to take down the gun longingly, while he says:

Jolly, wish I'd see a flock o' birds.

MARY. (*showing nervousness*) I'd rather go without than hear ye fire. I wish ye didn't keep it loaded.

THADDEUS. Ye know I ain't got time t' stop an' load when I see the birds. They don't wait fer ye. (*Hangs gun on wall.*)

After this we must be very dull indeed not to be confident that the weapon will be used later in the play, presumably at the climax. So when Mary runs blindly to the wall and shoots, we are ready for it. You may say that in so handling it Mr. Beach sacrifices a certain terrified surprise, which is true; but he gains in return a sense of uneasiness and expectancy which is much more valuable to him.

The significant handling of deadly weapons, especially firearms, is of all kinds of preparation the most palpable. A six-shooter hauled out of a hip pocket, examined, and put back again, will bring more people to the edges of their seats than all the eloquence of Shakespeare. This particular mode of preparation is an important aid in creating suspense; and the same is true of all others which point forward to exciting action. What playwright, intending

to show a midnight robbery in the first act, would fail to set his people to talking about recent robberies in the neighborhood, or omit a warning visit from the police or a mysterious telephone call, or in fact leave any stone unturned to chill the flesh and fire the pulse with expectation?

Thus, one of the prime services of preparation in regard to action is for producing suspense, for creating the atmosphere which will allow the event to make its maximum effect. It frequently happens that the arrival of some one is an important event in the play, but to let that person slip in quietly would never do; the audience must be worked up to a state of curiosity proportionate to the weight of this entrance. A famous instance of this in the long play occurs in Sudermann's *Magda*, the first act of which is given over entirely to exposition and to preparing for Magda's entrance, so that we look forward to the second act with the liveliest curiosity. Whoever has seen Mr. A. A. Milne's *The Truth About Blayds*, will remember the delightful details by which the entrance of the great man in the first act was prepared.

But even more often than it is the servant of suspense, preparation for action, like preparation for character, is the servant of logic and clearness. Some things have to be explained when they take place; others need to be explained before they take place. In deciding how much preparation he will need for coming events in his play, the dramatist will ask himself all the questions which an intelligent playgoer

might ask; and if they are not sufficiently answered by the course of events in the play, he will see that they are specifically answered in dialogue or action. If, for example, some one of the characters is to disclose an important piece of information which he might not be expected to know, some kind of explanation must be given. We are told earlier in the play that he has been seen talking to So-and-so, or that he has just returned from such-and-such a place. Entrances of people who live in the same house, or very near to each other, do not require preparation, but if a person who lives at a distance is to be brought in, we are usually told that he is in town, or has called up and will be over in five minutes. Besides being one of the most overworked instruments of exposition, the telephone is also the faithful servant of preparation.

By clearing the way beforehand, one avoids the awkward necessity of explaining at the time of the occurrence. Furthermore, one prevents unwelcome shocks of surprise, which may awaken suspicions in the minds of the audience that the action of the play is mechanical, the characters puppets, and the author an inexperienced person. Preparation is the oil which makes the bearings of the action run smoothly, without creaks.

Preparation for character. If a play turns on a particular trait of character, we must be prepared for the operation of that trait. In an earlier chapter I had occasion to speak of Miss Gerstenberg's play *The*

*Unseen.*¹ The first scene, as the reader may remember, is taken up with the antics of a stupid servant, with emphasis on her forgetfulness; this, aside from its own comedy values, is designed simply as preparation for an important act of hers—the mislaying of a telegram. Now telegrams and other important papers are frequently mislaid in life by people who are neither stupid nor forgetful, but the strict logic of the theatre, of which I have spoken, argues that important papers are never mislaid without adequate cause. So Miss Gerstenberg, quite rightly, takes pains to show us that Hulda is just the kind of person to do such a thing. Perhaps the reader may feel that her preparation is over-weighted, but at least the principle is right.

Sometimes plays turn on peculiarities of habit, such as always losing one's belongings, or always going to bed at a certain hour, or always proceeding to work by the same route, or always taking a nap after dinner. In such cases we expect to be properly informed about the peculiarity before it is put in action.

Frequently a person must make an important decision, or commit an extraordinary act, or behave in a way counter to his known character. We will suppose that a coward is to show sudden bravery, or a conscientious woman is to lie, or a harmless, law-abiding citizen is to commit burglary, or a judge is to take a bribe, or a thief is to forego his loot. In any

¹ See page 37.

decently conducted play the seeds will be planted long before the act, so that when the surprising thing happens, which throws such consternation among the people on the stage, we, the omniscient audience, understand and approve. I have spoken at the beginning of this chapter of the careful steps by which Barrie leads to poor, suppressed Mrs. Sims' little spark of rebellion. One of my own students desired to write a dramatic story of a Swedish laborer who drops into a saloon, just after burying his wife, full of resolutions to live soberly and decently for his children's sake, and then, under the influence of a low woman, gets drunk and staggers off on another spree. To make us believe that a man, after so solemn an experience, would fall back into his old ways at once, it was necessary to persuade us from the outset that the man had no will power, and that his reformation was probably futile. This was done directly by conversation between the woman and the bartender, and indirectly through the temper of the man's language.

If one person is to take a definite stand against another, or upon a principle, it is useful to allow him a preliminary skirmish in which he reveals his character. Thus Shakespeare prepares us in *King Lear* for the resistance which the Duke of Albany is eventually to make against Goneril, by showing him, in earlier scenes, mistrustful of her behavior toward her father.

In short, no person in a play should behave in such fashion that we are left uncertain as to his motives, or

in actual doubt as to whether the action is consonant with his character. Through preparation we establish our authority over the logic of character.

Preparation for dialogue. The discussion of this phase of preparation properly belongs under dialogue, but it seems convenient to speak of it briefly here. Whenever a play moves to a significant closing speech, the approaches to that speech should be laid well back, at least by the middle of the play. I have already cited two examples of such speeches—in *Fancy Free* and *The Twelve Pound Look*—so that further illustration should not be required. To lay these approaches does not necessarily mean building the speech itself into the body of the play, as in the case of *Fancy Free*; but it does mean instructing the audience in such a way that when the moment comes for the speech they will receive it with delight and with an instant coupling of source and present utterance. Thus when, at the end of Becque's ironical comedy, *Les Corbeaux*, Teissier says to the bankrupt Vigneron family: "My poor friends, you have been surrounded by rascals!" we, recollecting his own bottomless rascality, applaud the delicious irony of this remark.

CHAPTER VIII

DEVELOPMENT

1. *Causes of Failure.*

It is a common experience with beginners, I find, to sail prosperously through the difficulties of opening and exposition, and then founder ignominiously in the uncharted waters of the development. The reason why is partly because the waters are, for them, uncharted. Having launched out boldly with but a dim notion of the port they hope to reach, and a still dimmer notion of how to get there, it is no wonder that they fail. For the successful handling of the development—that vital part lying between the exposition, or introduction, and the climax—tests to the full all the playwright's dramatic senses of situation, character, and dialogue. That is why I have insisted, in Chapter II, on plotting all the important stages of the play before writing a line of dialogue.

The first cause of failure among beginners is that frequently they do not know what their climax, or focal point, is to be. This is fatal. The novice dramatist can easily set a play in motion without having the least idea where it is to end, but as he enters upon

the steps which should lead definitely to the climax, he is a lost man unless he sees not only his objective, but also a clear road to it. Any writer may very well change his mind in the course of composition and decide that a different path will be better, but if he relies on inspiration to cut his path for him he may expect to find himself miserably deceived. That common experience with beginners of being "stuck" in the middle should never be permitted. It is the result of haste and carelessness.

But even when a play has been plotted through to the end with reasonable care, sometimes the complete version fails from anæmia; and this anæmia may be due to one or both of two causes—temperamental coldness and inexperience. I shall speak of the second first.

Every dramatist wishes to get from his material, the maximum effect of the kind he wants, and this is just what most beginners do not know how to do. Intelligence alone will not carry them through to success—they must have either extraordinary dramatic intuition or experience. Dramatic intuition is better, no doubt, because its results are freer and fresher, but for most people it is experience that counts. The reason why many experts make a business of rewriting other people's plays for production is that they know from long experience how to bring to light effects which the amateur has left hidden. This is what Mr. George Cohan calls putting in the "gravy," which means, in the kinds of plays he rewrites, seasoning

them to the popular taste. But even where it is not a matter of writing for the great American public but rather of writing for the play itself, no little experience is needed before one learns how to extract all the juices from a given situation. I find that nearly all my youngsters skim on fleet wings over important scenes where they ought to linger. It is because they do not see into the scene; all they see is the most obvious movements and the externals of character. What they need is training and study, and especially practice.

But no amount of study or practice will avail much against the other cause of failure—temperamental coldness. This is a point upon which too much emphasis can not be laid; I could wish, in speaking of it, to possess the eloquence of Demosthenes and the authority of Aristotle. Writing plays is nothing, even among the best, but a great or little game of make-believe, and the would-be dramatist who can not make believe is beaten from the start. He must lose himself in his situations, he must live among his characters, he must feel that the play is actually existent, that he has brought it to life, and that it surrounds him. Sardou, writing melodramatic clap-trap, wept and laughed while in the throes of composition, cursed his villains and exhorted his heroes. The austere Curel, writing subtly psychologic plays for the intelligentsia, sees his people moving about in the room like ghosts. The nature of the play does not matter; what matters is to be absorbed in it so that it ceases to be an in-

tellectual exercise and becomes almost, or even quite, an hallucination.

The rational, logical processes are deeply involved in creating a play; but their work is done mainly in the preliminary organizing and drafting. There one can not be too coldly critical. But the actual writing is chiefly a matter of emotion, however "intellectual" the play may be. One has to "feel" one's characters, one has to "feel" one's situations, one has to "feel" one's dialogue. Currel, who has carefully analyzed his own processes, tells us that the initial labor of writing his dialogue is for him a painful, distressing business—the characters do not live, nor do they move as he wants them to. Then after this sort of thing has gone on for some time, he gets into the right mood, tears up what he has written, begins again, and proceeds easily and surely. To remain always outside the play, phrasing each speech by deliberate effort, is to write a play which will, to be sure, progress through the determined stages to the determined end; but it will be a cold, stony thing.

If at the same time a portion of the writer's mind is held in reserve, to act as onlooker and critic, a check is afforded against his rushing blindly off the track. Such a feat of intellectual gymnastics is by no means so difficult as it would seem, as any practised writer knows; but if this is too much for the young dramatist, he will do better to throw caution to the winds and himself into his play, trusting his revision to pull him back on the right road.

I have had young people tell me about their plays with enthusiasm, as if they were recounting something that they had seen and heard, their faces alight with inward amusement over the good things that were said and done. It is a good sign—an excellent sign. I know then that whatever faults their play may have it will be alive. The dullest of all cold things is a cold play.

Enthusiasm is perhaps not the best word to describe the right mood of composition, for some people are distrustful of enthusiasm. Relish is the word I myself prefer. A play should be written with relish—or at any rate should sound as if it were.

2. The Importance of Reserves.

One lesson the young dramatist has to learn is not to dump all his wares on the counter at once. What he should do is to give out a little at a time, developing each increment before adding the next, and thus keep a reserve supply upon which he can run for a length of time that will surprise him. No one, setting out to write an essay on a given topic, would attempt to treat his subject in all its aspects at once. Instead he divides it into its component elements, arranges them in ascending order, and takes them up one by one, devoting a paragraph or more to each, and securing thus a movement constantly reënforced to its climax. This fundamental principle of composition is as valuable to the dramatist as to the essayist. For

scenes in plays are paragraphed just as surely as chapters in books, else they would be shapeless and confused. Let us see how this method of development works in single scenes.

We turn once more to our much abused *Twelve Pound Look*, this time to the long scene between Kate and Harry. Here, with only two people to hold the stage during some twelve or fifteen minutes, there is every need of careful planning so as to keep the scene moving forward with interest and variety. Barrie has done it by dividing the scene into four paragraphs or sections, as follows:

Paragraph one is provided by the nature of the situation, and would be much the same wherever two people meet after a long absence—that is to say, it is a preliminary skirmish. The usual exclamations of surprise and recognition make part of it, the indignation of Harry makes the rest. Of course Harry orders Kate from the house, and of course she almost goes; so much is to be expected. The student will note the use of the false close of which dramatists are rather fond—that is to say, the apparent movement of a scene toward an ending, before the real development has begun.

The second paragraph is eleven pages long, in the Scribner edition, extending from page 59 to page 70. It is opened by Harry's question: "Who was the man?" and is built mainly on that theme. Really the theme is double, for Kate also is curious, and wants to know what happened when Harry came

home that night and found her gone. The rightness of this paragraph hardly needs demonstration. Harry is just the man who could imagine no other reason for his wife's leaving him than that she had run off with some other man, and Kate's feminine curiosity is the most natural thing in the world. Out of the mutual questioning Barrie easily presses eleven pages of fascinating dialogue. He is in no hurry—he has better stuff in reserve, but it will be still better if he holds it back a little; and meanwhile there are too many riches in the present state of the game to pass over them lightly. Kate is of the greatest assistance to him here, for she has a provoking little trick of not answering questions, and of asking many in her turn. Thus she does not at once deny the charge that she ran off with one of Harry's friends, and takes a wicked delight in his efforts to guess which one it was. So the sparring goes on, each pursuing his own way and Kate getting hers. She must picture to herself the scene of his homecoming; he must correct and fill in the details; the old letter must be found and read again; and so on.

The third paragraph contains the real focus of the play. When Kate has satisfied Harry that she did not elope, his inevitable question is: "Then why did you leave me?" This portion of the scene is eight pages long. Here it is Harry who helps the dramatist, for he is too thick-headed to grasp easily what Kate is trying to tell him, so that she has to explain patiently, bit by bit. The reader will notice that her

share of the dialogue changes in tone, for she is less bantering than she has been, and her speeches are longer. We perceive a note of emotion deeper than any that has been heard till now in the play. This section is brought to an end by another peremptory invitation from Harry to leave the house. Kate begins to draw on her gloves as we enter upon the last section.

The fourth paragraph is four pages long, and is closely related spiritually to the one which precedes. As Kate makes ready to go, the talk widens to include Harry's present family, his children, but especially Mrs. Sims. Here it is that Kate directly charges Harry with stifling his wife as he had been in the way of stifling her, and warns him to beware of the "twelve pound look" in his wife's eyes. This paragraph is brought to a close with the entrance of that unfortunate woman.

I doubt if one is likely to find anywhere a more beautiful piece of construction. But other examples of the same careful, logical development by reserves may be found in scores of plays, of all kinds. For example, it is used in another play on which I have several times drawn for illustration, Mr. Jones' *Her Tongue*. I may say at this point that *Her Tongue* is a good example of the kind of play that any capable dramatist can turn out easily—workmanlike, clever and amusing in an obvious way, without depth or charm. But although the long scene between Patty and Scobell has none of the subtlety or insight resi-

dent in the one we have just been analyzing, nevertheless the problem of holding up such a scene is the same, and is solved in a similar way. In this case the scene falls into two large divisions; in the first Patty is trying with all her misplaced coquetry to draw a proposal from Scobell, and in the second she is in a tantrum because she has failed. The first section is developed by putting Patty through all the paces that her creator can think of: some of her topics are the dance at which they met, the location of Argentina, loneliness in a foreign land, Argentine dress, amusements in Argentina, and last of all, her mother. It is her assumption that of course her mother will go too, and the dire evidence that her mother is a worse talker than she, that definitely frightens Scobell from his proposal. The second, and shorter section, is easily composed of Patty's alternating tears of disappointment and threats of legal retribution. The best thing Mr. Jones does with her is the magnificent about-face which she executes as soon as the Bracys enter upon the scene, a hasty attempt to turn defeat into victory by vehemently rejecting a proposal which she has never received.

These two are instances of paragraphing within a single scene of two people. Let us now consider the method as used in a whole play of three people. The play is Schnitzler's *Literature*.¹

It opens with a long scene between Clement and

¹ In *Comedies of Words*.

Margaret, the first part of which is a discussion of horse-racing (Clement being a sportsman) and is by way of introduction. This leads by natural transition to a discussion of the life Margaret was living when he met her, amid Bohemian companions who are not at all to his liking. This part of the dialogue is about equally divided between his attacks on her old companions with her defense of them, and his attacks on her volume of poems. With regard to this last, he is much troubled by the passionate details of these poems, which suggest a source in experience; she explains at length that they are all "ideal" and that his jealous suspicions are unfounded. From this the talk moves to another stage. He tells her that if she wishes to marry him she must promise to write nothing more, whereupon she confesses that she has written a novel, and that it is already in press. Deeply offended, he leaves her. This closes with somewhat too final definiteness the first large section of the play, creating a break which seems to me the only structural weakness. The play really has to make another start, which it does with the entrance of Gilbert, Margaret's old lover.

The new scene begins with a long paragraph of reminiscence, in which the two go over the days when they were lovers and literary co-workers. Gilbert attempts to reopen sentimental relations, but gets no encouragement. The dialogue moves on to a new topic, the novel she has written. She tells him the

plot in a delightful passage—how it is based on their love affair, disguised, of course. In fact, all the people in it are real. But the most real thing is the letters—they are the actual love letters exchanged by Gilbert and Margaret. It is safe, of course, because no one knows but them. Gilbert is indignant, not at her using the letters, but to think that she had been calculating enough to make rough drafts of her own share in the correspondence, of those letters which seemed the passionate inspiration of the moment. Then he tells her that he too has written a novel on the same theme and has used the very same letters. This is a bombshell for her, because—suppose Clement should read both novels, as he is sure to do. Amid these anxieties she has still room for indignation that Gilbert should have made copies of his tender and spontaneous epistles.

Then Clement returns. We are at the climax, for he brings with him an advance copy of Margaret's novel. Not that he tells us so on entering—no, Schnitzler holds that in reserve. He merely informs Margaret that he has been reflecting, and has decided to consent to the publication of her novel. Then, as Gilbert maliciously offers him a copy of his, Clement produces the advance copy. This is the climactic moment, and it is very near the curtain. The complication of the two novels has been wrought to its highest point. Something must break. The resolution is accomplished by Margaret's flinging her book on the

fire while she cries: "No, Clement, no. I cannot accept so much kindness. I don't want to hear of this sort of thing any more. . . . Now, do you believe I love you?"

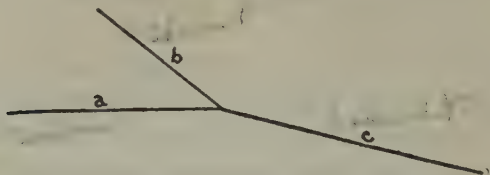
The point to which I wish to call special attention here is the way in which the facts about Margaret's novel are gradually revealed. First it is just a novel; then by degrees we learn more and more about it until, at the proper moment, Schnitzler reveals for our delight the full complications which are involved. We might imagine a more inept dramatist starting his play with Margaret's discovery of the rival novel and the letters it contains. This would have been a good start, in itself; but how would he have gone on from there?

3. *The Side-thrust.*

"By the complication I understand one or more factors added to a dramatic situation, and making its solution more difficult. It may bring into play a second action, or a second theme, or a second angle upon the points at issue; it may introduce additional premises, bringing them either from the outside or from the depths of the characters themselves; but it contributes something which, while reasonable according to the standards of the play itself, is generally unexpected by and interesting to an audience."¹

¹ Percival Wilde: *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, p. 183

This is well said. One may represent the effect of such a complication graphically in this wise:



Here *a* represents the initial line of action, *b* the complicating thrust, and *c* the resulting direction. To illustrate, Miss Gerstenberg's *The Unseen* has instances of complication from without and from within. Of the second kind, which Mr. Wilde says arises "from the depths of the characters themselves," is the mislaying of the telegram by Hulda; this happens through no outside agency, but merely through Hulda's own stupidity. It changes completely the course of events in the household. Toward the end of the play a quite external agency—a newspaper item—again changes completely the course of the story. These two complications are like strong thrusts from the side directed against a moving body; the course of the body is deflected until it meets another thrust, with consequent displacement. And this, in long plays, may be multiplied, as in the common mystery play in which the thrusts come so fast on each other's heels that the movement resembles that of a shuttle.

In a short play, for obvious reasons, these thrusts must be limited to two or three at most, and usually there will be only one. A very fair illustration of

the common way is provided by Mr. A. A. Milne's comedy *Wurzel-Flummery*. The rise of the curtain introduces us into the household of Robert Crawshaw, M. P., and informs us that Crawshaw's daughter is in love with a young politician whose politics and character are not to her father's liking, so that it looks bad for the match. Here we have a situation of a recognizable kind, from which, by their own momentum, certain consequences might be expected to follow. But the momentum is greatly accelerated, and the whole direction is changed, by an absurd yet delightful complication; to wit, Crawshaw has been left £50,000 by will on condition that he change his name to Wurzel-Flummery. From now on the action consists in turning over and over this impossible name and viewing it from every comic angle. At the same time into this new theme is woven the original theme of the unacceptable suitor.

A notable instance of side-thrust has already been cited in *Granny Maumee*. Here the play moves up to a decided climax at which Granny recovers her sight and is able to look upon her new grandchild. Then comes the dreadful discovery that the child is partly white, from which springs a new line of action motivated by revenge and with a climax of its own.

Ordinarily, as in *Wurzel-Flummery*, the complicating thrust comes early in the play; sometimes, as in *Granny Maumee*, it comes near the middle; not infrequently it may not come until the very end, where it supplies the material for the climax. In Eugene

O'Neill's popular little tragedy *'Ile* the greater part of the play is expository, presenting to our imagination a picture of the tail end of a long and unsuccessful whaling voyage, and especially a picture of the captain's wife, who is nearly mad from homesickness. Then at the very end comes the discovery of a blowing whale and the consequent countermanding of the order to sail for home, which drives the woman over the border line of sanity.

These are a sufficient number of illustrations of what the side-thrust can do. Of course it is only one means of developing action, but it is a useful one to bear in mind. Its chief advantage, I should say, is that if the thrust has any strength at all, it will, as it collides with the initial line of movement, generate a degree of heat which will necessarily warm and stimulate the action. Things ought to move well from then on—at least for a time.

4. *Interruption and Postponement.*

One means of development is by interruption. In this case an important scene, usually one of explanation, is broken into by the entry of a new character and a new interest, so that the attention is for the time diverted. Later on the explanation is resumed, and may this time be brought to a head. If sufficient curiosity has been aroused in the first place, this delay will serve to increase it. Simple postponements may

also be secured through the unwillingness of some one to answer questions, as Barrie postpones for eleven pages Kate's answer to Harry's questions as to whom she ran away with.

Postponement by interruption is more used, on the whole, in plays of complicated action than in simple plays of character. Every one who has any repertory of farces in memory will recall how often a comic action is prolonged through the efforts of some one to make an explanation, or to discover a fact, and his repeated failures because of accidental interruptions. Mystery plays also deal largely in interruptions. But plays of a more serious nature may likewise turn this device to good service.

Unless the action of a play is exceedingly simple, one has to do a certain amount of juggling with the various strands. Beginners often find it easier to simplify the problem by dividing the action into separate compartments, dealing with one thing at a time, just as they sometimes find it easier to handle dialogue between two people than between four or five. But it is very often necessary to keep several balls in the air at once; and inability to carry off this juggling feat easily is a sign of beginner's inexperience.

5. *By-products.*

Another trait of inexperience is sticking too resolutely to the direct line of progress. I do not mean

that digressions are to be encouraged, but that part of the business of "realizing" a scene consists in including its natural by-products, developments and ideas which, although they are not part of the parent stem of the movement, sometimes provide its most attractive flowers. These by-products give a richness and naturalness to the play which without them would seem thin, even barren. In *Literature* there is no actual need, so far as the plot is concerned, of those passages in which Margaret and Gilbert each expresses indignation that the other has kept copies of his own letters, yet without them we should lose one of the chief ornaments of the play. Nor in *The Twelve Pound Look* is it, strictly speaking, necessary that Kate shall give her somewhat lengthy reconstruction of what happened on Harry's return home the night she ran away; yet no one would wish this passage done away with. I have a recollection, by the way, that this episode was longer in the stage version played in London back in 1912, and that for some reason Barrie decided to retrench upon it.

The inexperienced dramatist rushes through his play in a bee line for the climax, like a horse making for his stable door. The wise one takes time, as he goes, to gather in all the episodes of dialogue and action that will adorn his tale. The question of where to draw the line, so as to guard against over-stuffing, can not be decided by rules; experience and artistic sense are the only guides.

6. "*The Return*" Again.

In Chapter III, I quoted at length the scenario of a student play called *The Return*, a play of situation of the sentimental, popular type, but offering certain plain opportunities for effect in the development. I propose now to give the text of that play, point out its weaknesses, and make some suggestions for improvement. This practical illustration will serve not only to reënforce what I have been saying in this chapter, but also to illustrate what I have said in previous chapters about character and preparation. Some of the points will unavoidably anticipate what I have in mind to say about dialogue.

I begin at the point where Jeanne, having refused to marry Kent because her life is devoted to finding her father, leaves the stage to show him out of her apartment.

(The French doors open stealthily and WARREN TURNER, a veritable tramp, peeps in. He then comes slowly in and looks around him. He rubs his hands together in pleased anticipation as he takes in the evident tokens of wealth and refinement. The photographs on the mantel attract him and he goes to look at them. A sound from without startles him and instantly his hiding instincts assert themselves. He rushes to the French doors, leaving them ajar, so that he is partially visible to the audience.

JEANNE reënters and leans against the door in an attitude of hopelessness for a few seconds, then picks up the picture of KENT from the desk and seats herself up right. TURNER

comes partially through the doors and hesitates, uncertain what to do. He approaches her somewhat timidly, but is afraid to touch her when he gets near enough. Jeanne is lost in contemplation of the picture. He starts toward the window as if to depart, then carried on by an impetus of bravado approaches her and touches her shoulder. Jeanne starts up but shrinks back in horror as she sees this wretched creature before her.)

TURNER. (*Falters at the repugnance he sees in her face*)
Jeannie——?

JEANNE. What are you doing here? I'll call the police if you don't go at once.

(*She retreats to the telephone table.*)

TURNER. (*Fearfully*) I'll go! I'll go!

JEANNE. (*Struck by a thought*) Wait! my name—why did you——?

TURNER. That was a slip. I didn't mean anything. I might have known you wouldn't want to see a bum like me.

(*He turns toward the window.*)

JEANNE. (*Running after him*) What do you mean? You're not—Oh, you can't be my father, *you!*

TURNER. (*Whining*) I might have known you wouldn't want to claim me. Not me! I'll clear out. I only wanted to see if you was all right, anyhow.

JEANNE. (*Stopping him*) No, no, you mustn't leave me. You see, I couldn't have known you after all these years.

TURNER. (*Half facetiously*) Well I ain't—much to look at any more. You've no cause to complain though, I see!

JEANNE. Oh, why haven't you come before? Mother spent her whole life looking for you.

TURNER. (*Pleased*) Did she now? Fine woman, that. I often tell the girls down at Joe's they couldn't have held a candle to my wife.—Well, I always meant to come back—couldn't, of course, for the first few years, what with all the cops hanging around. Then I lost track of you when you left home, and there was my pal—you know I broke out with one of the slickest pickpockets you ever saw. . . . Jeannie, I ain't been hobnobbing with our class since you saw me last. It's been the East Side for me, and a fellow gets kinda to grow like them when he's with 'em for twenty years. They're as good hearted a bunch as you could ask for. Share the last bite with you.

JEANNE. Were you so awfully hungry?

TURNER. Pretty often. You see, I couldn't get a steady job on account of the cops and——

JEANNE. (*Jumping up*) Oh, let me get you something to eat now. Aren't you hungry? And it's drizzling out, too. Are you cold? I'll make some hot tea.

TURNER. Never mind, never mind. I ate a couple of hot dogs on the way over. (JEANNE *sits down again*.) Well, now, that I'm here——?

JEANNE. What would you like to do—father?

TURNER. That's fine. I like to hear you call me father once more.

JEANNE. I thought perhaps of a little farm I know up in Connecticut. It's off the main road and there aren't but a few simple country folk for neighbors. You could get lots of rest there and good food and forget all this horrid past.

TURNER. But you—you're young, and there wouldn't likely be no lovers there.

JEANNE. Oh, lovers! I'm a budding novelist, you know. And I ask nothing better than a quiet place to write.

(The telephone rings. JEANNE goes to answer it.)

JEANNE. Hello? Yes, Don . . . A new plan? What is it . . . ? Oh no, there's no use my looking for him in the Philippines. *(TURNER starts as she says this and pays close attention to the rest of the conversation.)* . . . Perhaps it is a good place to hide, but he isn't there. . . . You're leaving *when*? At midnight! But why, Don? . . . And your mother wants you to stop off in Ohio and see her? Of course you should. . . . No, no, I can't possibly go. . . . Good-bye—write to me.

(She replaces the receiver on the hook and struggles hard to keep from crying. TURNER rises and comes over to her.)

TURNER. What is it, Jeannie? Tell your father! Has any man dared to do anything to you? Don't cry—I'll tend to him.

JEANNE. Oh no, it's nothing. A dear friend of mine is leaving for two years, that's all.

TURNER. And he wants you to go with him, eh? Do you love him, Jeannie?

JEANNE. Oh, let's not talk about him, father. *(She dries her eyes and smiles bravely.)* Let's plan some more about our farm in Connecticut. Won't it be fun to live on a really, truly farm? We'll go hiking together, and make a garden, and—

TURNER. *(Who has been going through an evident struggle, rises with a half-oath.)* I thought I could do it, but I can't. I ain't that bad, after all. And besides, a Connecticut farm's no place for an old East-sider like me. Like as not I'd run off and leave you in a month or two.

JEANNE. Father, what are you saying? Don't you like our picture? After all, we needn't go there, we——

TURNER. That's kind of you, girl. You're a damned

good sort. I'm proud of you. . . . No, I ain't your father. I saw a chance for a good living, but I can't play up.

JEANNE. I don't believe you—you are doing this for me!

TURNER. I was playing the part mighty well, wasn't I? But a bum like me your father?

JEANNE. But you knew my nickname and everything!

TURNER. Oh, I heard your story from a guy that used to work for your mother. Well, I guess I'd better be going.

(As he starts for the French doors, JEANNE sinks into a chair. He turns back, struck by a sudden thought.)

TURNER. Why, I got that story from your father. I knew him. He's—he's dead.

JEANNE. Dead? Are you sure? Oh, tell me all about him.

TURNER. Well, there's not much to tell. He was a good scout—always helping the other fellow and never complaining.

JEANNE. Oh, I knew he must be! Tell me—how did he die?

TURNER. Eh? Oh, yes—well, when Joe's old shack burned down, the one he used to have, you know, Joe lived up over it and his kid was up there. They thought everybody was out, and then Joe remembers the baby, but the firemen won't let him go up because the blaze has such an awful start. Your father don't say nothin' but just sneaks off and gets that kid. But it burnt him awful bad, and they took him to the hospital—and he died next day.

JEANNE. *(Sadly)* My poor father!

TURNER. Well, I gotta be goin'. This ain't no neighborhood for me at this time of night. Good-bye, Miss. Your dad would sure 'a been proud of you if he'd known you.

JEANNE. Oh, wait! Won't you let me give you a little money for my father's sake? Here——

(She opens her purse and gives him some bills.)

TURNER. You didn't need to do this, Miss, although I will say it's mighty kind of you. If there's ever anything I can do for you, just call for Bill down at Joe's and I'll sure come. Well so long!

(He goes out by the French doors. JEANNE watches him disappear, then runs happily to the telephone.)

JEANNE. Main 2634 . . . Hello, Don? This is Jeanne—and I can go, I can go!

(While she is talking, TURNER slips in, goes to the mantel, and takes a large photograph of JEANNE and her mother. As he reaches the French doors again, he stops and nods his head approvingly as he hears what she says, then slips out.)

Now the first observation to make about this is that while it sticks to the scenario, it does so in a perfunctory way; and the writing is throughout as cold as Greenland's icy mountains. Not one of the high lights is brought out. The whole thing, furthermore, is too short. The writer, seeing that his play covered only eight pages of typescript, should have been aware of that. The fact is that these eight cold pages were all he could get out of his theme because he was never for a moment inside his play. Let us see what he might have done with it.

We shall bear always in mind, to begin with, that Turner is the lead, and that all the best things must go to him. We shall, therefore, consider every stage of the scene from his point of view.

In the suggested revisions which follow I have tried to build up Turner's part by supposing: first, that he has acquired a hard, cynical tone in the last twenty years; second, that at the outset he has little paternal sentiment, but that it grows as the past reasserts itself; third, that his sacrifice is motivated largely by his discovering relics of gentlemanly qualities that he had thought to be lost long ago. This conflict between the remote past and the near past gives the angle from which I have viewed the whole scene. All this gives opportunities for changes of mood and for development of character that are not in the original version.

The first high light comes on Turner's entrance. The business as set down in the play is quite satisfactory. Then:

JEANNE. Who are you? What do you want? If you don't go at once, I shall call the police!

TURNER. Jeannie——?

Jeanne. You know my name? Who are you?—How do you know my name?

TURNER. Didn't I give it to you?

JEANNE. You are not—you're not—(*in a whisper*) my father!

TURNER. Why ain't I?

JEANNE. My father!

TURNER. Did you get the cards I sent?

JEANNE. My God!

TURNER. (*In an injured tone*) My Gawd! Is that all you've got to say to your father after twenty years?

JEANNE. You—you've changed.

TURNER. Well—what do you want? You can't expect a bum to look like a duke, can you? (*With bravado*) Come here, girl, and kiss your daddy!

(JEANNE goes to him half reluctantly, half attracted. He puts his arm about her, and she shivers and draws back. Then in a sudden revulsion she throws her arms about him.)

JEANNE. Daddy!

TURNER. Here! Go easy! (*He examines some part of his indescribable clothing.*) Don't get so rough!

JEANNE. Poor daddy! Poor, poor daddy!

(*She sinks into a chair.*)

Well, there is more to this for both of them. It gives a chance to express some of the emotion contained in the situation, and at the same time I have given Turner a chance for a laugh so as not to let the play become too serious at this early point. All the way through, Jeanne's natural tendency to make the dialogue sentimental and heavy is counteracted by Turner's callous hardness.

Jeanne's offer to bring some food, made in the original play but not carried out, seems to me worth acting upon. Her absence gives Turner another chance to go over the room, and especially to take notice of Kent's picture. While he eats she questions him. I imagine the dialogue going something like this:

TURNER. Damme! Real grub!

(*He attacks it greedily. JEANNE sits and watches him with a kind of horrified compassion.*)

JEANNE. Has it been terrible, father?

TURNER. (*His mouth full*) Huh?

JEANNE. Your life—these twenty years—what has it been like?

TURNER. Hell.

JEANNE. Why didn't you come before?

TURNER. I was afraid.

JEANNE. You needn't be afraid any more.

TURNER. Huh?

JEANNE. I'm going to take care of you.

TURNER. (*Picking up the bottle of wine disapprovingly*)
Ain't you got no beer?

JEANNE. No. I can get you some.

TURNER. You stay where you are! This'll do.

(*He pours out a glass and lolls back in his chair.*)
Pretty fine place you got here. Belong to you?

JEANNE. Yes.

TURNER. All of it?

JEANNE. What do you mean?

TURNER. You ain't married?

JEANNE. Oh no!

TURNER. This place don't belong—to no friend of yours?
(*He jerks his head toward KENT's picture.*)

JEANNE. (*Indignant*) Certainly not. I write stories and scenarios. I am making good money.

TURNER. Why ain't you never got married?

JEANNE. I—haven't had time. I'm too busy.

TURNER. Huh! I ain't never seen the girl that was too busy to marry a man if she could get him. Ain't nobody ever asked you?

JEANNE. Oh, yes!

TURNER. (*Keenly*) Not that feller over there?

JEANNE. He—he isn't anybody—just a friend.

TURNER. Just a friend? What was you makin' such a fuss over his picture about, just now?

JEANNE. Why, that was—that was nothing. Father, tell me about yourself. You haven't told me anything about what you have been doing.

One cardinal fault in the original play is that nothing is prepared for, but is allowed to take place casually, unaided, as best it can. In my version, I begin to get ready for the big decision from the moment Turner enters and sees Jeanne weeping over a picture, and I plant my signposts at intervals. It is now time, however, to work in the other important line of motivation. Jeanne's invitation to Turner to tell about his experiences leads to a guarded account of a very shady twenty years. Then——

JEANNE. You mean—you have lived all this time with——with——

TURNER. (*Sneering*) Say it—thieves, and pickpockets, and stick-up men! Yes, I have, and why shouldn't I? Wasn't they good to me? What would the *honest, respectable* citizen have done if he'd found out who I was? Chucked me over to the bulls! Who was I to live with if it wasn't thieves and pickpockets and stick-up men?

JEANNE. And you lived—as they did?

TURNER. (*Craftily*) Now don't you be asking too many damned questions.

(JEANNE goes to her desk and brings a photograph, which she silently hands to TURNER.)

TURNER. What's this? Oh-h yes. A picture of me in the old days, just before the big bust. (*He laughs sar-*

donically.) God. I was a swell! Look at them clothes.

JEANNE. That is the idea of you I have always carried in my mind.

TURNER. (*Ugly*) So that's it? You wasn't looking for me to come back ragged and dirty. You thought I'd still be slick and sweet, like that. Yah!

(*He tears the picture savagely and flings down the pieces.*)

JEANNE. I'm glad you did that.

TURNER. Huh?

JEANNE. (*Beautifully*) I'm glad you did that, father. I should have done it myself.

TURNER. What d' you mean?

JEANNE. That man, in the picture, is dead. I don't want him to come between us.

TURNER. You mean—you ain't sorry I've come back?

JEANNE. No father. From the bottom of my heart—I'm glad!

After all, though Jeanne must be kept subordinate to Turner, there is no reason why she should not be given a few things to do, and inasmuch as her fine qualities call forth the best in the man, we should be given a glimpse of those qualities. In any extended scene between two people, the leading part gains, up to a certain point, by having a strong subordinate part to play up to. What one must try for, in writing the subordinate part, is a middle line between nullity and dangerous equality.

The picture incident is brought in for two reasons: first, because it gives a chance to reënforce dialogue with business, making the action more vivid; and sec-

only, because I propose to make good use of it later on.

The important stage, and the highest light, is that portion of the scene which includes Turner's resolution to sacrifice himself. In the original play practically nothing was made of this. It did not stand out emotionally, because there seemed to be no realization of the war going on in the man's mind, and the key of dialogue did not rise by a jot. It might be done something like this. I resume the dialogue just after Kent's telephone call.

TURNER. (*Roughly*) Who was that?

JEANNE. Donald Kent—there. (*She motions to the picture.*)

TURNER. What's he want?

JEANNE. Oh, nothing. It isn't anything worth bothering about.

TURNER. Then what are you hollerin' for?

JEANNE. Don't mind me. It's just nerves.

TURNER. He ain't done nothin' to hurt you? Has he? Damn him! I'll——

JEANNE. No, no, father. It's nothing like that at all.

TURNER. Well, what is it then? I want to know. (*JEANNE is silent. He adds not unkindly*) See here, girl. I'm your father even if I am a bum. I want to know about this.

JEANNE. He is going to the Philippines, for several years. He wants me to go along.

TURNER. He wants to marry you?

JEANNE. Yes.

TURNER. Well, why don't you?

JEANNE. (*Trying to smile*) I told you I was busy.

TURNER. Don't give me none of your woman's answers. Do you love him?

JEANNE. No.

TURNER. You lie.

JEANNE. Please, father——.

TURNER. You do love him, don't you? (JEANNE *nods*.) How much?

JEANNE. Not so much as I love my father.

TURNER. (*Somberly*) I wonder. Why should you love your father, girl?

JEANNE. I always have.

TURNER. *Duty*, eh?

JEANNE. No, father.

TURNER. (*Harshly*) You can't have him, do you hear? You can't have him.

JEANNE. No, father.

TURNER. If I hadn't come back—you would have taken him, wouldn't you?

JEANNE. No.

TURNER. Why not?

JEANNE. So long as I knew you were alive I—I had to wait for you.

TURNER. So that's the way it is.

JEANNE. Father, he means nothing to me. Really he doesn't. When I was alone, and lonely, I got a little sentimental over Donald. But now that I have you to love and work for, I shall never think of him again.

TURNER. Huh! I wonder! (*He eyes her somberly for a moment. Then quietly*) You got any money—any cash—in the house?

JEANNE. Yes, a little—in my bedroom.

TURNER. Go and get it.

(*She goes out. TURNER walks over to KENT'S photograph; peers at it malevolently. Shakes his fist at it. "Damn you!" Picks up the torn pieces of his own photograph and puts them together. Laughs grimly. "She said you were dead. You ought to be, but you ain't—no, by God, you ain't."* He straightens himself, lets his arm sink slowly to his side, and the pieces fall from his hand. JEANNE returns.)

JEANNE. Here is all I have in the house.

TURNER. (*Harshly*) How much is it?

JEANNE. Seventy-eight dollars.

TURNER. Give it to me.

JEANNE. Why——?

TURNER. I said, give it to me! Can't you hear?

JEANNE. (*Handing it over*) Yes, but what do you want with it?

TURNER. That's a question! What does any man want with money?

JEANNE. But—why, of course, if you need it. Only, I thought, since we are going away together——

TURNER. Like hell we are. You're going to stay right here and lay quiet while I make my getaway.

JEANNE. You're not going? Just when I've found you?

TURNER. Found me? Found who?

JEANNE. My father.

TURNER. Hell! I ain't your father.

Turner knows that only by bullying Jeanne into a daze can he get away with his tremendous lie; and so he blinds her by the feigned theft and crushes her

with his brutality. In this handling of the climax, which is many times as long as the original and yet none too long, we are given a chance to see the conflict of desires and duties going on in the mind of Turner; and lest there be any mistake about it, or any danger of being taken in along with Jeanne, the scene of pantomime with the two pictures is put in. The few words Turner mutters to himself do not constitute a serious violation of the rule against soliloquies, especially in a play for a popular audience. The alternations of mood, carriage, and voice give a chance for varied acting which will be grateful to the man who plays Turner.

I shall not quote the revised ending, but I may point out a few things to be borne in mind. In the first place, it is to be as short as possible, and therefore Turner's explanations must be vague and brief. He is naturally anxious to get away before he weakens or she begins to think and question. The long story of his own supposed death will have to go. Instead, one sees a better way of using it. Turner is about to leave by the window. Jeanne asks him how her father died. He pauses on the sill. "At a lodging house fire. Helping a kid that had got caught. We was pals then. Your dad *was* a gentleman, Miss. And he died like one."

"Like a gentleman!" echoes Jeanne as her father disappears.

Of course this is not the only way in which this story could be treated, and instead of reconstructing

Turner on my plan he could be kept more the weak, whining creature he is in the original. But to my mind the situation gains by making him masterful and dominant, and certainly the play is easier to write. My own criticism of my own revision is that, for vaudeville purposes, it is lacking in humor. Vaudeville audiences like to have their stronger emotions leavened generously with laughter.

Finally, let me explain that I have chosen a conventional theme deliberately, so that it might be pulled to pieces and rebuilt without any of the compunctions that would arise if I were to treat a more serious or a subtler theme. In this case the important component of the artist's personality is not much concerned, and one is free to write according to rule. Without claiming any great virtue for my revision, I should like to point out that its superiority over the original development arises from these causes, stated in order of importance: (1) the passions and changes of emotion are recorded with greater reality; (2) the important moments, or high lights, are not hurried over, but are dwelt on with the intention of squeezing their emotional content; (3) coming events are foreshadowed, and the mind of the audience is thus prepared to receive them at full value; (4) the action is made more concrete by the introduction of business.

CHAPTER IX

DIALOGUE

1. *Introductory.*

I hope my reader will not for a moment infer, because I begin a new chapter headed "Dialogue," that I look upon dialogue as a department of playwriting independent of character, exposition, development, and so forth, or that the dramatist can occupy his mind with the problems which I have been discussing in the foregoing chapters without being at the same time deeply engaged in dialogue. The development of a play in respect to action, character, and dialogue, after passing beyond the scenario stage, will go hand in hand, whatever the artist's method may be—whether he sketches his play briefly in dialogue and then goes over it to fill in the details and strengthen the shading, or whether he proceeds more slowly, completing each scene before attacking the next. To treat dialogue as a separate department is an unfortunate necessity in any theoretical treatise of this kind. It gives a false view of the true interrelation of all the departments, against which the reader should be constantly on his guard.

Nevertheless, there are a number of considerations that belong to dialogue alone, or more especially to it than to anything else. In the following sections of this chapter I shall deal with these considerations, besides repeating such points already made as seem to me of greatest importance.

2. *Unaffected Dialogue the Best.*

Strictly speaking, all stage dialogue is artificial, just as drama itself is artificial. It is no closer to being a literal transcript of a real conversation, than the actors are to being the people whom they represent. Dialogue is an artistic imitation of something in real life, and like all other artistic imitations its resemblance is fictitious and conventionalized. But the *impression* it should make on the spectator is not one of artifice, but of reality. This holds even for the dialogue of artificial comedy and farce, because it should conform to the standards of reality which we reasonably apply; and certainly we do not apply the same standards to *The Importance of Being Earnest* that we apply to *Anna Christie*. The absurdities which Wilde's people utter are just what we would expect from such people. The standard of reality, then, is not an absolute one, but is fixed by the play itself.

The average play being an imitation of the world we live in, the standard of reality conforms pretty closely with that which we apply to conversation in real life. Thus the business of the dramatist is to make his peo-

ple talk to one another in such a way that the illusion of watching a transcript of real life is not injured by any jarring notes. This, I grant, is easier said than done. "Be natural," the instructor says with glib finality; and the student, humbly acquiescent, wonders how to be natural and at the same time avoid being monotonous, dull, insipid, rambling, and commonplace.

Certainly it is too much to expect him to leap at once into command of natural, easy, effective dialogue; but he can make an important beginning if he will only strive not to be *un*-natural. Clever dialogue is doubtless a jewel of great price; but far better plain, unvarnished speech than one in which the effort to be clever is so apparent that spontaneity is lost. What I am saying sounds platitudinous; perhaps it is so—but at any rate it is a truth which can scarcely be overemphasized. Much sad experience with dialogue by amateurs and professionals has taught me that. There are all too many plays, alas, in which the dialogue is so strained and so false in its efforts to sparkle that the taste is like gall and wormwood. I could cite instances to prove my point from printed plays, but the better part of wisdom will be to go to my own—fortunately unpublished—files:

BOB. I don't know what we are going to do with John Macy.

DAVE. Why? What is the matter with John? What has he done?

BOB. Nothing, that's just the trouble.

DAVE. Well, what would you have him do? He's not a lazy sort.

BOB. Oh, no, I do not mean he is lazy.

DAVE. But you just said he does nothing.

BOB. Well, I do not mean that sort of nothing. I mean that he has a particular aversion to a certain kind of universal proclivity.

DAVE. Shake yourself loose from the fine language, brother, and tell me what's on your mind in good old common lingo.

BOB. I mean just this: John's aversion for creatures of the opposite sex is not natural.

And so the play runs on to the bitter end. Among young writers of a certain type there is seemingly an obsession which persuades them that for stage purposes the most round-about, twisted, unnatural manner of stating a simple fact is the most effective. Nothing could be more wrong. The play from which the above fragments of dialogue was taken would not be, under the best conditions, anything but feeble; yet had the dialogue been simple, straightforward, businesslike, in the language which young men use to one another, it would have had at least the prime virtue of honesty. One respects simplicity which makes no pretensions; and one detests affectation. The first preparation of the young dramatist, therefore, in respect to his dialogue, is to clear from his mind any disposition to write arduously, constrainedly, for effect.

In fact he ought not to give the impression of writing for effect, even if he can do it well. There is a

fashion—or I might better say there *was* a fashion, for although it is not entirely dead it is fortunately outmoded now—of writing dialogue which carried a self-conscious smirk of complacency, as though it were on display and were well aware of it. It is effective dialogue, no doubt, but effective in a showy, insincere way. One finds it best exemplified in the older plays of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero and Mr. Henry Arthur Jones. The following speech from the latter's *Mrs. Dane's Defence* is a fair sample:

SIR DANIEL. My dear Lal, fifty women out of a hundred have no notion of what truth means, and don't bother about it. The other fifty have the rudiments of truth-sense in various stages of developments; and will generally tell the truth where their own interests don't clash. But in matters of love, there isn't one woman in a hundred—there isn't one woman in a thousand, that, when she's put to it, won't lie right and left, up and down, backwards and forwards, *to* the man she loves, *for* the man she loves, *with* the man she loves, *about* the man she loves, to gain her ends, and *keep* the man she loves.

Now this is, in a way, very well written, and undoubtedly it is agreeable to the actor. What I object to is not that it is artificial, but that it is artificial in a story-play whose speech should be straightforward and plain throughout. One has an uncomfortable feeling that English lawyers like Sir Daniel Carteret never speak in this rhetorical, balanced fashion—except upon the Jones-Pinero stage. However, I would not be

so unjust to Mr. Jones as to imply that the bravura passage I have just cited is characteristic of him at his best. His later comedies, in particular, are written with delightful ease and naturalness, and in that very same war horse of the artificial stage, *Mrs. Dane's Defence*, there is a great deal of excellent writing. The following passage impresses me as a model of direct, stage-wise simplicity. It occurs in Act II:

SIR DANIEL. Well, how do we stand now?

LADY EASTNEY. The Bulsom-Porters are coming over to meet you, and I've asked the Canon to look in. They'll be here directly.

SIR DANIEL. And then what are we to do?

LADY EASTNEY. Talk it over.

SIR DANIEL. Don't you think there's been quite enough talking it over the last fortnight?

LADY EASTNEY. We haven't had your assistance. Candidly, what is your opinion?

SIR DANIEL. I have none. I'm waiting for facts. Have you heard from Risby?

LADY EASTNEY. Not a word.

SIR DANIEL. What did you say to him?

LADY EASTNEY. I asked him to tell me in the strictest confidence all he knew about Mrs. Dane.

SIR DANIEL. And he hasn't replied?

LADY EASTNEY. It's only five days since I wrote. Perhaps my letter hasn't reached him.

SIR DANIEL. Rather strange, isn't it?

LIONEL. (*Indignantly*) It's much more strange that everybody should be saying and believing the worst of an innocent woman without a shadow of proof.

SIR DANIEL. Without a shadow of proof that she is innocent.

LIONEL. I thought, sir, that the English law assumed everybody to be innocent until he is proved guilty.

SIR DANIEL. I do not assume that Mrs. Dane is guilty or innocent. I only say I don't know.

LIONEL. Mrs. Dane has done exactly what an innocent woman naturally would do.

SIR DANIEL. Oh, pardon my inexperience, my dear Lal. What does an innocent woman naturally do?

LIONEL. She treats all slander with silent contempt. She knows her life will stand the test of inquiry, and therefore she doesn't stoop to answer calumny.

SIR DANIEL. Meantime everybody cuts her.

LIONEL. Lady Eastney, if you were in Mrs. Dane's place how would you act?

SIR DANIEL. Supposing you were innocent?

LADY EASTNEY. (*After a little pause*) I think I should have acted exactly as Mrs. Dane has done.

SIR DANIEL. Supposing you were guilty?

LADY EASTNEY. I don't know.

Here is dialogue without verbal brilliance, without depth of thought, without striking characterization—in short, dialogue which is occupied with nothing but the business of saying what it has to say with the least possible fuss. Unselfconscious and therefore unobtrusive, it goes quietly and thoroughly to work, moving the play steadily forward and at the same time giving the impression of natural conversation between friends. These qualities form the sound core of dialogue, and I am inclined to think that a passage

like this is a finer test of a dramatist's abilities than half a dozen epigrams or florid solo numbers like Sir Daniel's aria on women.

3. *Euphony.*

One thing that any writer can do, no matter what his dramatic gifts may be, is to avoid ugly and awkward combinations of sounds. "Foolish girl," wrote one of my students, "what difference will what a minstrel may think make?" This obviously is quite impossible—no inflection could make peace between these two wrangling verbs. An easy correction would be: "Foolish girl, what difference will it make, what a minstrel may think?" This form at least is intelligible; but even so it is not easy to say, as any one can prove by repeating it a couple of times glibly. The two "what's" and the heavy alliteration makes it disagreeable both to say and to hear. A speech should come "trippingly from the tongue," and it can do that only when it contains no tongue-twisters.

In the same play I find these two lines:

MINSTREL. Can a minstrel do nothing to lighten the burden of a queen?

QUEEN. You can do nothing but sing, and I am tired of song.

Here the fault is not with either speech alone, but with the awkward and quite unnecessary repetition of the

phrase "can do nothing." Repetition is, as I shall show later on, an invaluable element in dialogue building, but where it occurs, not with deliberate intent for emphasis or *liaison*, but casually, as here, it is a pernicious fault. In this case the Queen's reply would gain immensely in force by reducing it to "nothing but sing, and I am tired of song."

The way to test dialogue for euphony—and by euphony I mean at present not the cultivation of harmony but merely the avoidance of discord—is the way to test dialogue for all its qualities, i. e., by reading it aloud. If it reads easily it is probably pretty fair dialogue in other respects also; if the tongue halts and stumbles over the consonants, or if a reasonably sensitive ear catches unpleasing vowel combinations, then it is undoubtedly bad. No purpose can justify harsh dialogue.

Nor is smooth or euphonious dialogue to be got simply by avoiding ugly combinations of words. It comes from avoiding redundant, muddy, overweighted sentences and from carefully placing the emphasis. But these are matters which I shall consider more at length in the following sections.

Euphony 4. *Character.*

The first thing we expect of good dialogue is that it shall reveal the personality of the speaker. Now the factors that go to form an individual's manner of

speech are various and may be thus roughly tabulated:

1. Environmental factors:
 - a. Dialect and provincial idiom
 - b. Occupation
 - c. Education
2. Sexual factor—the way a man speaks, that is not like the way a woman speaks
3. Personal factors:
 - a. Disposition of the will and the passions
 - b. Habits

These various factors scarcely need to be explained in detail. I have listed them only to show the numerous resources that a playwright has at his disposal for delineating character. Frequently none of the environmental factors plays an important part, because the person in question is not distinctly marked by provincialism, occupation, or education. But the other two groups are always active, and they supply such efficient means of distinguishing individual from individual that there should be no excuse for failure in that respect. It is true that many people have what we call negative, or colorless, characters, but as a matter of fact no character is absolutely colorless, and every one has his own habits and affectations of speech.

But certainly it is easier to represent people with much color in their character than people with little color. That is a point on which I leaned in the chap-

ter on Characterization, and I wish to emphasize it here. Characters which have color—because they are positive, or lopsided, or whimsical, or picturesque—are the easiest to handle and the pleasantest to listen to. This is not merely advice to beginners; it is true of drama in the large. Most characterization, even by dramatists who pass as masters of intellectual subtlety, is put on with a whitewash brush. Take Shaw, for example. How broadly and simply he has sketched such people as Roebuck Ramsden (in *Man and Superman*), Mrs. Warren, Candida's father, Cleopatra, Joan of Arc, Mr. Clandon (in *You Never Can Tell*), Raina and Bluntschli (in *Arms and the Man*). Barrie, like Schnitzler, avoids commonplace people like the pestilence and populates his plays with men and women who are all charming and all a little peculiar.

Well, peculiar people distinguish themselves easily by their talk. A passionate and dictatorial man (like Harry Sims), a feline woman (like Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman*), a hard, shrewd woman (like Violet in the same play), an expansive, platitudinous magnate (like Mr. State in *The Madras House*), a man crammed with middle-class prejudices (like Mr. Huxtable in the same play), a flaming, energetic poet (like Don in Mr. Besier's play of that name), and a hesitant, melancholy poet (like Marchbanks in *Candida*), a peasant of the Ireland of Synge, a spinster of the New England of Alice Brown—these, and countless more like them, are so full of the material of character that we know quite well how this ma-

terial, pushing forth in the form of speech, is going to express itself. When my students struggle and fret because their people won't talk in the right way, I know that in nine out of ten cases the reason is because they have not clearly seen their people—they see them vaguely as patterns, but not as individuals. But in many cases, also, the fault is that they have provided so few positive traits of character that they have nothing on which to ground speech. An automaton will necessarily talk like an automaton.

Of the environmental factors, dialect is undoubtedly the most immediately effective in suggesting character. The language of Synge's peasants, of the negroes in Ridgely Torrence's plays, of the Carolina mountaineers in *Sun Up* and *Hell-Bent-fer-Heaven*, of the Scotch in *The Little Minister* and *Buntty Pulls the Strings*, is colorful, expressive, and interesting, as all dialect is, to the foreign ear. It is hard to resist dialect, if it is used with authority, because it has such a true, homely flavor that we instinctively credit the dramatist with as much command over the secret ways of his people as he has over their outward expression. For that reason, many an indifferent play has passed current because of the exotic charm of its dialect. In speaking of dialect characters in Chapter V, I warned the young dramatist from tackling them unless he had a pretty intimate knowledge of them, and I repeat the warning here in reference to dialogue. Nothing jars more upon the sensitive ear than dialect which is not quite right.

Next to provincial dialect in effectiveness come slang and the various dialects of trades. Here, as with provincial dialect, what counts is color and piquancy. Slang is a dull thing unless it has originality; and here too authority counts. If you are going to use slang, do not use it timidly but wade boldly in, avoiding the commonplace expressions that one hears all the time, and unearthing the rarer gems of popular metaphor.

Business dialect plays an immense rôle on our American stage. Under this term I include not merely the slang of shops and offices, but that peculiar to any occupation, including thieving and vagabondage. The public never tires of plays about the newspaper game, about the cloak and suit game, about the bond broking game, about the advertising game, about the housebreaking game. A comparison of plays written largely in the dialect of business with those written in a provincial dialect shows that the latter form on our stage an almost negligible group, whereas the former are many and popular.

One caution must be given in regard to business dialect, namely, to take care of being too technical. Business dialect is made up partly of specially selected slang and partly of genuine technical terms. The latter give the color of reality, but the former give the pleasure. Too much technicality bores an audience, but its relish for the picturesque slang of, say, a vaudeville actor or a garage mechanic, is inexhaustible.

American comedy of recent years has been fairly

rich in studies of middle-class American character. The examples that stand out memorably are wholly of people who talk some kind of slang or dialect—that is to say, they do not use pure, correct English. The same is not so true of English comedy, which runs more to “polite” society. But on a hasty survey of the past five years in the American theatre one would pick these people, or others like them: the grandmother in *Lulu Bett*, the father in *The First Year*, Pa Potter in *The Potters*, Ricky and Ronny in *You and I*, the vaudeville actress in *Lightning* (popularized but good), the Old Soak, and the three charming youngsters in Mr. Vincent Lawrence’s *Two Fellows and a Girl*. I doubt if one could match this list with one made from cultivated people speaking conventionally correct English. Perhaps that is to be regretted. Certainly high comedy of the kind written by Barrie, Wilde, Hankin, and Milne, hardly exists in this country. Our strength seems to lie in homely genre comedy of middle-class life, and in occupational farce and melodrama. Certainly there is a wide field here, and so far as concerns middle-class genre comedy, a fertile field. Plenty of work remains to be done. Playwrights are just beginning to realize the picturesque elements in American life and speech, not only among the more sensational places and trades, but in the average American home. Especially there is a field of light, homely, ingratiating comedy opened up by Mr. Vincent Lawrence in such plays as *Two Fellows and a Girl* and *In Love with Love*. I regret

keenly that these two plays are not yet published, because I should like to quote examples of their exceedingly clever dialogue.

But enough of dialect characters. My reader will begin to think that I would people the stage with eccentric old grandmothers, crotchety fathers, and young folk who scatter slang like fireworks. I protest that it is not so. The roots of character do not lie in such surface exhibitions, but in the human heart. The fact is, it is only by knowing a man down to the heart that, without the aid of peculiarities of speech or habit, you can make him real. Here the only thing that really counts is sincerity. If he sincerely expresses the passions, doubts, despairs, hopes, or joys with which his creator has endowed him, he will take on the color and outline of life; for speech, after all, is merely the audible expression of character.

5. *Movement.*

The pace or movement of dialogue varies with the purpose of the scene, and there are times when it sinks almost to zero. These changes of speed are governed largely by the content of the play, so that the author does not have to decide arbitrarily whether a given scene should be fast or slow. At the same time he may, through ignorance or carelessness, do harm to the tempo of his play. There is an art in knowing how to move fast without being clumsy and how to move slowly without running down. The ideal move-

ment is firm, supple, elastic, giving always, through its different tempi, a sense of progression.

The first obstacle in the path of movement is redundancy. Dialogue ought to be free of undergrowth, of superfluous words and sentences, of superfluous speeches. Most dialogue is redundant in the first draft. Therefore an important business of revision is to clear away mercilessly everything that is not really needed. Sentences should be reduced to the fewest number of words that will carry the meaning and effect. Each speech should be scrutinized to decide whether it justifies its retention.

The following speech comes from a woman who is intending to leave her husband because he is indifferent to her. The man with whom she is talking has just remarked that she has an unusual taste in old furniture. "Perhaps," she says, "I do not know what there is in me. But if those things are a part of me, why can't the man who lives with me and whom I see every day, or rather whom I'm supposed to see every day, know them too? He cannot know me without knowing them, appreciating them." Now when we examine this critically we find that the sentence, "I do not know what there is in me," is superfluous, because it adds nothing important to the "Perhaps." The main idea of the speech is contained in the following sentence, which is as badly formed as it well could be. The parenthetic phrase "or rather whom I'm supposed to see every day" is clumsy and quite unnecessary—its idea can be much more concisely expressed by an

"almost" inserted before "every day." The last sentence is mere padding.

Revised, the passage reads: "Perhaps. But if these things are a part of me, why can't the man who lives with me and whom I see almost every day—know them too?" The speech has been stripped of fat, and in its present form works much better because the one thing it means to say stands out clearly. Furthermore, the little word "almost" can be so underscored as to give a touch of irony that was not in the original.

Redundancy, bad enough anywhere, is especially bad in spirited passages where the phrases should be short and abrupt. In the following dialogue I have indicated by italics passages that are quite superfluous or that should be condensed. The context is as clear as it need be.

MRS. DE VREE. She's after our money!

MR. DE VREE. *Well, she shall not*¹ have it! I shall forbid Phil as soon as he comes home to even speak to her again.

MRS. DE VREE. What if he will not listen to you?

MR. DE VREE. I'll make him. If he doesn't I'll threaten to disinherit him. He'll listen to me then.

MRS. DE VREE. *Don't you think you had better not speak to Phil tonight? He is to take her to the Russells, and*² *perhaps for that reason* you had better wait until tomorrow.

MR. DE VREE. *Wait until tomorrow!* Until tomorrow! Why, he might propose to her tonight.

¹ Should be "shan't," of course.

² "Phil is to take Miss Treeman to the Russells tonight. Perhaps . . ." etc.

MRS. DE VREE. Don't forget that *he has accepted and we have accepted*¹ Mrs. Russell's invitation to dinner to-night and he is to take Miss Treeman.

MR. DE VREE. I tell you I won't wait until tomorrow. *Why worry about dinner invitations when there are plenty to be had?* I tell you I won't wait one minute. . . . *The minute I see the fool, I'll forbid him. You can't stop me this time.*

MRS. DE VREE. *Listen, Charles, for your own sake don't you think you had better put it off until tomorrow?*

MR. DE VREE. *I tell you I've made up my mind what I shall do and I'm going to do it.*

MRS. DE VREE. I agree with you that it should be done *and I want you to do it.* But what will the Russells think?

MR. DE VREE. I don't care what the Russells think.

The reason why so much of the above dialogue can be carved off without injury is that the whole passage is, from every point of view, poverty stricken. Both people have so little to say that their creator was driven to banal repetitions in attempting to build up the dialogue. If the italicized phrases and speeches had had good stuff in them, stuff which added to our knowledge of character or of fact, I should not have been able to cut them out. No vital speech will endure cutting; its place will show as a gap in the text. But when a phrase can be destroyed without leaving a trace, it is *ipso facto* an excrescence.

An elementary fact to remember in connection with

¹ ". . . that we have all accepted." The whole speech is a mere repetition of Mrs. de Vree's last, and is therefore superfluous.

movement is that short sentences and speeches make for speed and long sentences and speeches for slowness. A single longish speech in the midst of a rapid, close-cropped passage will not slow things up if it is written in the same high key; but an exchange of long speeches always gives an effect of deliberateness. In general, I should advise strongly against writing such dialogue at all; the dangers of monotony are too great. Usually the right movement comes from mingling short speeches with long, and when it happens, as it not infrequently does, that one speaker has a good deal to say, the other should be reduced to short comments and questions. When, for example, Kate in *The Twelve Pound Look* comes to the point where she must pour out the thoughts that have harbored for years in her breast, Harry, the voluble, is forced into the role of listener. Whenever I see pages of dialogue, or even a single page, where the antiphonal speeches are all of the same length, even though that length is only two or three lines, I feel sure that a good deal is wrong. Variety of sentence structure, of sentence length, and of speech length makes for movement, as it does for emphasis.

Even in serious conversation long sentences are to be avoided. They are to be avoided because, in the first place, they are difficult for the actor. Emphasis is largely concerned here, but so also is movement. In general it will be found that a long speech of short sentences moves better than one of long sentences.

SIR HARRY. A man? What do you mean by a man?

KATE. Haven't you heard of them? They are something so fine that every woman is loath to admit to herself that her husband is not one. When she marries, even though she has been a very trivial person, there is in her some vague stirring toward a worthy life, as well as a fear of her capacity for evil. She knows her chance lies in him because if there is something good in him, what is good in her finds it, and they join hands against the baser parts. So I didn't give you up willingly, Harry, but invented all sorts of theories to explain you. I said that your hardness was a fine want of mawkishness, that your coarseness went with strength, that your contempt for the weak was virility, and that your want of ideals was clear-sightedness. As for your ignoble views of women, I tried to think them funny. Oh, I clung to you to save myself, but I had to let you go, because you had only the one quality, Harry, success, and you had it so strong that it swallowed all others.

That is what Kate might have said; but this is what she really does say:

Haven't you heard of them? They are something fine; and every woman is loath to admit to herself that her husband is not one. When she marries, even though she has been a very trivial person, there is in her some vague stirring toward a worthy life, as well as a fear of her capacity for evil. She knows her chance lies in him. If there is something good in him, what is good in her finds it, and they join forces against the baser parts. So I didn't give you up willingly, Harry. I invented all sorts of theories to explain you. Your hardness—I said it was a fine want of mawkishness. Your coarseness—I said it goes with

strength. Your contempt for the weak—I called it virility. Your want of ideals was clear-sightedness. Your ignoble views of women—I tried to think them funny. Oh, I clung to you to save myself. But I had to let you go: you had only the one quality, Harry, success. You had it so strong that it swallowed all the others.

Upon comparing these two versions, one is in no doubt as to which is the better. The two are the same—or very nearly so—in respect to ideas, but in respect to movement and emphasis the second is vastly superior; and this superiority comes from a certain rhythmic swing which carries the hearer along. More technically, it comes from the skillful use of short sentences and balanced structure. Of balance and antithesis, as important aids to movement, I shall not speak further now, because I shall have more to say about them in the section on Emphasis.

No very precise rules can be laid down as to the proper length of sentences because what is important is not so much the sentence as the clause, and pretty long sentences may be so constructed that they fall into a chain of subordinate units. Punctuation, too, is arbitrary. The last sentence in the Barrie passage above might as easily have been written as three. It would be spoken as three, at any rate. All this suggests that the typical structure of long sentences in dramatic dialogue is compound rather than complex. What would be, in composition intended for the eye, a subordinate clause, will very

likely be stated as a separate sentence, for clearness and emphasis. Instead of saying: "I did it because I hated to see Michael beaten," one might say: "I hated to see Michael beaten. That's why I did it," or "I admit I did it. You see, I hated to see Michael beaten." It all depends on the effect you want, and the test—let me say again—is reading aloud. If it *sounds* right, it ought to be right.

I may add by way of footnote that the short sentence is much used by those who, like Maeterlinck and Lord Dunsany, cultivate the naïve style. It suggests a primitive simplicity of manners, as in the following:

I am overcome with grief. God has not leaned out of the heavens and seen me in my woe and assuaged my pain. He has visited me with sorrow. He has allowed death to stalk across my threshold. And death has left me in widowhood and childlessness. He has torn my husband from my arms and my child from my womb. Woe is me!

This has a certain distinctive movement, like the Old Testament lamentations. Indeed the short sentence mode is of some value in suggesting movement in passages which are lyric or declamatory. Of all who have used it, Lord Dunsany gets most movement out of it. His dialogue will repay study from that point of view.

Mr. Percival Wilde, in *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*, makes an excellent point in regard to "yes" and "no" dialogue.¹ "Assent," he says, "makes

¹ Chapter XXXI, "Dialogue and Movement."

for slow movement. Dissent, qualification, opposition, whether expressed by other persons or by the speaker himself, make for rapid movement. Assent announces, in effect, 'We will stay here as long as you wish.' Dissent announces, 'We can not stay here. We will go elsewhere.'” This is well said. Good dialogue seeks always to avoid the monotony of declarative agreement, in which a plain statement of fact on the one side is matched by an equally plain statement of fact on the other; and just as nothing gives life to the action of a play better than strife, so nothing enlivens a dialogue more than disagreement. The two passages from Strindberg quoted in Chapter V are good illustrations of movement through conflict.

Where there is no reason for conflict, movement is greatly aided by questions, which break up the inflectional monotony of declarative statements and stimulate a sympathetic curiosity in the audience. The ordinary use of questions is well enough illustrated by the conversation between Mr. Dix and James Lampert in Chapter V. The splendid movement in the following dialogue, taken from Mr. St. John Ervine's *The Magnanimous Lover*,¹ comes from a union of qualities that we have been discussing—the short sentence, the antagonism, and the question.

MAGGIE CATHER. Did you ever love me, Henry?

HENRY HINDE. I suppose I liked you, Maggie.

¹ One of the finest short plays in the language.

MAGGIE. But you don't love me now?

HENRY. It's ten years since I saw you last.

MAGGIE. Do you love this minister's daughter your father was talking about?

HENRY. That's neither here nor there, Maggie. When God tells us to put our desires aside, we've got to bow our heads and say, Thy will, O Lord, not ours, be done.

MAGGIE. Is she a good woman?

HENRY. Aye, she is.

MAGGIE. She never had a child?

HENRY. No, she's a good woman.

MAGGIE. She's worthy of you, maybe.

HENRY. Aye, she is. She's worthy of any good man.

MAGGIE. And I suppose I'm not worthy of you.

HENRY. You have fallen short of the glory of God.

MAGGIE. We both fell at the same time, Henry.

HENRY. I'm saved, and you're not. I'm in a state of grace, and you're in a state of sin.

MAGGIE. Then I'm not as good as you are?

HENRY. No, you're not.

MAGGIE. If I was saved, too, would I be as good as you are?

HENRY. That's for God to say, Maggie, not me.

MAGGIE. Do you think I'd be as good as you? Leave God out of it for a minute. If I committed a sin, you committed one, too.

HENRY. I'm not denying it.

MAGGIE. Aye, but you think I'm a bigger sinner nor you were; and if I was saved, too, you'd still think I was worse nor you, wouldn't you?

HENRY. I would.

MAGGIE. Why would you?

HENRY. Because you're a woman. Because it was through woman that sin first came into the world to damn the souls of men.

Questions, so useful in the development of character and the exposition of ideas, become the chief handmaid of dialogue in times of passion. No tirade, no denunciation, no outpouring of scorn is complete without a generous sprinkling of them.

Of the enlivening effect of action accompanying dialogue I have spoken before. Even business so insignificant as taking up a job of knitting or passing cigars gives a perceptible feeling of movement. Any one who has seen Mr. Milne's agreeable but tenuous play *Mr. Pim Passes By* will recall how much was added to the life of the play by the curtains which Olivia was eternally taking up and sewing. Doubtless the popularity of tea drinking scenes in pallid English comedy comes from the illusion they give that something is doing. But it is not such casual movement that I have in mind. It is, rather, such a scene as that between Mrs. Sims and Kate in *The Twelve Pound Look*, where Kate is busily ticking off a sample letter while they talk, or such a scene as the one between Anatol and Max in which Anatol unwraps one after another the various mementos of his past loves. Scenes like these, where action and dialogue are intimately related and the eye is busy as well as the ear, move with perfect ease, and may always be counted on so to move.

6. *Emphasis.*

In the very important matter of writing for emphasis, the young dramatist will bear in mind that all the aids to movement are aids as well to emphasis, and that redundancy is its worst enemy. The ideal of dialogue as regards emphasis is to be so phrased that when read aloud naturally the important words will find themselves in the right places and the vocal accents will distribute themselves of their own accord. Where you have to puzzle over a speech to decide how to inflect it, there is something wrong.

The first care of the dramatist should be to look to the endings of his sentences, because they are usually emphatic places and deserve important words. The following sentence:

I'll see you in hell before I'll give up Annie,
is not lacking in emphatic quality, but for real emphasis, here is the way to say it:

Give up Annie? I'll see you in hell first!

Now the end of a sentence is just the place where inexperienced writers love to add an unemphatic, qualifying word or two—"perhaps," "don't you?" "more or less," "at least," etc.

I think it's lovely—don't you?

They say he's a scoundrel, more or less.

You might try at least.

He has been lying to us all along, I should say.
These sentences, typical of vast numbers written by

my students, can be made tight by a simple shift which every schoolboy ought to know.

Don't you think it's lovely?

They say he's more or less of a scoundrel.

At least, you might try.

I should say he has been lying to us all along. But I am repeating matter which one may find in any text-book on rhetoric. The principles of sentence arrangement for emphasis are the same for drama as for any other form of composition. I shall add just one more point, namely, that the emphatic places in sentences always come before pauses; therefore the distribution of emphasis within the sentence should be made with that in mind.

Another common rhetorical device is repetition. This is useful and important but so self-evident that it need not detain us long. Inasmuch as Mr. Shaw is as fond as any one of the device, we may turn to him for illustrations by the bushel. The following occurs in the first scene of *St. Joan*.

STEWARD. Sir, I tell you there are no eggs. There will be none—not if you were to kill me for it—as long as The Maid is at the door.

ROBERT DE BAUDRICOURT. The Maid! What maid? What are you talking about?

STEWARD. The girl from Lorraine, sir. From Domremy.

ROBERT. Thirty thousand thunders! Fifty thousand devils! Do you mean to say that that girl . . . is still here?

STEWARD. I have told her to go, sir. She won't.

ROBERT. I did not tell you to tell her to go. I told you to throw her out. You have fifty men-at-arms and a dozen lumps of able-bodied servants to carry out my orders. Are you afraid of her?

STEWARD. She is so positive, sir.

ROBERT. (*Seizing him by the scruff of the neck*) Positive! Now see here. I am going to throw you downstairs.

STEWARD. No sir, please.

ROBERT. Well, stop me by being positive. It's quite easy: any slut of a girl can do it.

We find various kinds of repetitions for emphasis here. The simplest is the word repeated as an exclamation, as in Robert's first use of the word "positive." More subtle is the word repeated so as to recall and reënforce a speech at a little distance from it, as in Robert's second use of the same word. And then there is the phrase repeated with a slight variation. "I did not tell you to . . . I told you to . . ."

Still another rhetorical device, and one which is not likely to be discovered by the beginner so quickly as repetition, is that of balance, with or without antithesis. Let us look again at the words with which Kate withers—or ought to wither—Harry Sims.

Your hardness—I said it was a fine want of mawkishness. Your coarseness—I said it goes with strength. Your contempt for the weak—I called it virility. Your want of ideals was clear-sightedness. Your ignoble views of women—I tried to think them funny.

This has strong balance, and so had the weaker version that I devised: "I said that your hardness was a fine want of mawkishness, that your coarseness went with strength, that your contempt," etc. Yet the emphasis in Barrie's writing is far superior because the balance has been stressed by setting the various elements apart from each other in separate sentences and by using much repetition. The reader will note that in order to guard against a too mechanical movement to the passage, Barrie has slightly altered the pattern of one of the parts. Note also that having, in each sentence, two phrases to emphasize by position, he puts one at the end and the other, by permissible inversion, at the beginning. And because words taken out of their natural order always have the strongest emphasis which sentence-disposition can give them, the list of Harry's vices carries a slightly heavier accent than the list of his supposed virtues. A beautifully written passage!

By means of spaced repetition, of parallelism, of balance, one can give to an extended speech not only a quality of rhythm, but even a quality of pattern. Rhythm is primarily a servant of movement, and in the two following passages the sense of rhythmic movement is strong. But the emphasis is also good, though the substance, mood, and language of the second make it more striking there than in the first. In either case both movement and accent are right for the needs of the play. The first passage is from Mr. Sutro's little play *The Open Door*.

SIR GEOFFREY. What would you have me do? Go into the House? Thank you, I've been there. You spend your time on the Terrace or in the smokeroom till a muffin-bell rings; then you gravely walk into the lobby, where an energetic gentleman counts you as Polyphemus counted his sheep. Philanthropy! Well, I've tried that, but it's not in my line. I'm quite a respectable landlord, but a fellow can't live all by himself in a great Elizabethan barrack. Town—the Season? Christian mothers invite you to inspect their daughters' shoulders, with a view to purchase. I'm tired of golf and polo; I'm tired of bridge. So I'll try the good sea and the open plains; sleep in a tent and watch the stars twinkle—the stars that make you afraid.

You may say that such a manner of writing is all very well for polite, artificial conversation. But Mr. Eugene O'Neill uses essentially the same methods in conversation which is anything but polite or artificial. I quote from one of Yank's harangues in *The Hairy Ape*.

He's old and don't belong no more. But me, I'm young! I'm in de pink! I move wit it! It, get me! I mean de ting dat's de guts of all dis. It ploughs trou all de tripe he's been sayin'. It blows dat up! It knocks dat dead! It slams dat offen de face of de oith! It, get me! De engines and de coal and de smoke and all de rest of it. He can't breathe and swallow coal dust, but I kin, see? Dat's fresh air for me! Dat's food for me! I'm new, get me? Hell in de stokehole? Sure! It takes a man to work in hell. Hell, sure, dat's my fav'rite climate. I eat it up!

I git fat on it! It's me makes it hot! It's me makes it roar!
It's me makes it move! . . . I'm at de bottom, get me!
Dere ain't nothin' foither. I'm de end! I'm de start! I
start somep'n and de woild moves! It—dat's me!

Of course a dramatist writes not for the casual interpretation of the unskilled and unimaginative reader who ploughs through a dialogue without regard to nuances, but for interpretation by an expert in intonation and gesture, the actor. That is to say, he has an ally so powerful that the most banal remark oftentimes, in stage performances, takes on the luster of an epigram or the force of a smashing blow. One of the most famous rejoinders in modern drama occurs in *A Doll's House* at the point where Torvald Helmer, learning to his vast relief that Krogstadt does not intend to use the advantage he has over the Helmers, bursts out: "Yes, yes, it is so! I am saved! Nora, I am saved!" To which Nora replies, "And I?" Simple words, though pregnant enough in the context. But how tremendous they become when the voice and look of the actress are behind them!

The dramatist who has no notion of the resources of dramatic delivery will never write good dialogues. Every youngster who has gone through the invaluable experience of a rehearsal of one of his own plays knows how much he has had to rewrite his lines to fit them for delivery. For one thing, he learns that much that he has written in explicitly can be implied in a look or an intonation.

One of the commonest aids which an actor lends to emphasis is a slight pause before the word or phrase to be "projected." "Sir, you are a rogue!" bawls the irate father. To which the scapegrace son rejoins: "And you, sir, are—my father." Mrs Fiske has an unflinching method of pointing a line. She rattles on until she comes to the important phrase, then pauses ever so slightly, bends a little forward, deepens and strengthens her voice a little, slows the tempo just perceptibly—and the arrow flies true to the mark. Now in order that an actor may do things like this, the dramatist must play up to him. That is to say, he must watch his pauses—he must make pauses. He must allow for vocal inflections. He must never write anything into the text that can better be expressed in pantomime. My young friend of whom I was speaking some pages back made his forlorn wife say, "But if those things are a part of me, why can't the man who lives with me and whom I see every day, *or rather whom I'm supposed to see every day*, know them too?" And I showed how the italicized, over-explicit phrase could be condensed into one word, thus: "But if those things are a part of me, why can't the man who lives with me and whom I see *almost* every day, know them too?" With the slightest of pauses before the "almost" and the lightest of ironic accents, the speech is given an emphasis which the original sprawling line does not have. Yes, the actor is an enormous aid and comfort; but he must be played up to.

7. *Liaison.*

Most stage dialogue diverges from life in this respect, that whereas real conversation is often abrupt, disconnected, intuitive, making sudden leaps from idea to idea, conversation on the stage is so joined that the passages of thought are plainly marked. The reason for this is that most people hear slowly, especially when the talk is going on at a distance from them, and need to be led by the hand through the mazes of dialogue. But sometimes one comes upon a dramatist who scorns such explicit methods, preferring the subtler, hiatus-strewn movement of life. Consider, for instance, the following conversation, which occurs early in the first act of Mr. Granville Barker's *Waste*.

MRS. FARRANT. Dear Lucy, do you seriously think that the English spirit—the nerve that runs down the backbone—is disturbed by new theology . . . or new anything?

LADY DAVENPORT. (*Enjoying her epigram*) What a waste of persecution history shows us.

WALTER KENT. (*Capturing the conversation with a very young politician's fervor*) When they're disestablished they must make up their minds what they do believe.

LADY DAVENPORT. I presume Lord Charles thinks it'll hand the Church over to him and his . . . dare I say "Sect"?

WALTER KENT. Won't it? He knows what he wants.

MRS. FARRANT. (*Subtly*) There's the election to come yet.

WALTER KENT. But now both parties are pledged to a bill of some sort.

MRS. FARRANT. Political prophecies have a knack of not coming true; but d'you know, Cyril Horsham warned me to watch this position developing . . . nearly four years ago.

FRANCES TREBELL. Sitting on the opposite bench sharpens the eyesight.

WALTER KENT. (*Ironically*) Has he been pleased with the prospect?

MRS. FARRANT. (*With perfect diplomacy*) If the Church must be disestablished . . . better done by its friends than by its enemies.

FRANCES TREBELL. Still, I don't gather he's pleased with his dear cousin Charles's conduct.

MRS. FARRANT. (*Shrugging*) Oh, lately, Lord Charles has never concealed his tactics.

FRANCES TREBELL. And that speech at Leeds was the crowning move, I suppose; just asking the Nonconformists to bring things to a head?

MRS. FARRANT. (*Judicially*) I think that was precipitate.

WALTER KENT. (*Giving them Lord Charles's oratory*) Gentlemen, in these latter days of Radical opportunism!—You know I was there . . . sitting next to an old gentleman who shouted "Jesuit."

FRANCES TREBELL. But supposing Mallaby and the Nonconformists hadn't been able to force the Liberals' hand?

MRS. FARRANT. (*Speaking as of inferior beings*) Why, they were glad of any cry going to the country!

FRANCES TREBELL. (*As she considers this*) Yes . . .

and Lord Charles would still have had as good a chance of forcing Lord Horsham's. It has been clever tactics.

This is admirable dialogue in many respects—idiomatic, natural, true to the manners of the people who speak it. Its realism is beyond cavil. But it is not easy to follow—even a visitor sitting in the midst of it, if he were unfamiliar with the persons and issues discussed, would find it puzzling. And Mr. Barker does nothing to smooth over the difficulties. The momentary digressions, the delayed references, the implied sequences, the hints and allusions—all are left in their natural complexity. To follow the path—a very real path—through such a tangled wood is not beyond the powers of an alert mind, but most minds are not alert enough to relish that kind of intellectual exercise. They want not only a beaten path, but one equipped likewise with guide-posts.

A little reflection upon the foregoing passage shows us that its difficulties arise chiefly from two causes: first, the number of allusions to persons and affairs which every one on the stage knows all about and which no one in the audience knows anything about, and secondly the absence of liaison between speeches. The first of these troubles does not concern us now; Mr. Barker would say that it does not matter whether the audience understands the allusions or not—all they need to get is the atmosphere of political talk. The second, the absence of liaison, is also deliberately cultivated, by omitting precautions which most play-

wrights take great pains to observe. They acquire a smooth, coherent movement, first by making each speech a plain consequence of the preceding, and secondly by cementing the speeches together by repetition and reference. The way it is done may be illustrated by a passage from Act I, Scene 2, of Mr. Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan*. The Dauphin, in order to test Joan at her audience, has directed that Gilles de Rais shall play the part of king. La Trémouille and the Archbishop of Rheims are left on the stage.

LA TRÉMOUILLE. I wonder will she pick him out?

THE ARCHBISHOP. Of course she will.

LA TRÉM. Why? How is she to know?

THE ARCHB. She will know what everybody in Chinon knows: that the Dauphin is the meanest-looking and worst-dressed figure in the Court and that the man with the blue beard is Gilles de Rais.

LA TRÉM. I never thought of that.

THE ARCHB. You are not so accustomed to miracles as I am. It is part of my profession.

LA TRÉM. (*Puzzled and a little scandalized*) But that would not be a miracle at all.

THE ARCHB. (*Calmly*) Why not?

LA TRÉM. Well, come; what is a miracle?

THE ARCHB. A miracle, my friend, is an event which creates faith. That is the purpose and nature of miracles. They seem very wonderful to the people who witness them, and very simple to those who perform them. That does not matter; if they confirm or create faith, they are true miracles.

LA TRÉM. Even when they are frauds, do you mean?

THE ARCHB. Fraudts deceive. An event which creates

faith does not deceive; therefore it is not a fraud, but a miracle.

LA TRÉM. (*Scratching his neck in perplexity*) Well, I suppose as you are an archbishop you must be right. It seems a bit fishy to me. But I am no churchman, and don't understand these matters.

THE ARCHB. You are not a churchman; but you are a diplomatist and a soldier. Could you make our citizens pay war taxes, or our soldiers sacrifice their lives, if they knew what is really happening instead of what seems to be happening?

LA TRÉM. No, by Saint Denis: the fat would be in the fire before sundown.

THE ARCHB. Would it not be quite easy to tell them the truth?

LA TRÉM. Man alive, they wouldn't believe it.

THE ARCHB. Just so. Well, the Church has to rule men for the good of their souls as you have to rule them for the good of their bodies. To do that, the Church must do as you do: nourish their faith by poetry.

LA TRÉM. Poetry! I should call it humbug!

THE ARCHB. You would be wrong, my friend. Parables are not lies because they describe events that have never happened. Miracles are not frauds because they are often—I do not say always—very simple contrivances by which the priest fortifies the faith of his flock. When this girl picks out the Dauphin among his courtiers, it will not be a miracle for me, because I shall know how it has been done, and my faith will not be increased. But as for the others, if they feel the thrill of the supernatural, and forget their sinful clay in a sudden sense of the Glory of God, it will be a miracle and a blessed one.

This, it strikes me, is excellently written. The Archbishop, having to explain a novel interpretation of miracles to a man who is not used to subtleties of reasoning, proceeds by easy stages, with practical analogies, as one would teach a child. But this also advantages the audience, which is likewise something of a child. And not only does Mr. Shaw build his argument thus plainly and firmly, but he makes it still more firm by the repetition of the words "miracle," "faith," and "fraud," the recurrence of which is like mortar holding the bricks together. One should notice the large number of words other than these three which are used for liaison, either by direct repetition or by reference.

The method of liaison illustrated here is the common method of promoting clearness through coherence. The student can examine further into its ways and means by opening at any point in almost any play. The passage quoted earlier in this chapter from *Mrs. Dane's Defence*¹ offers a very good example of this fundamental type of liaison.

In the great majority of cases, liaison is merely a means to the end of more perfect coherence, and therefore should work unobtrusively; but in certain pronouncedly stylistic uses it becomes very self-conscious indeed. Here it takes the form of deliberate repetition for effect; its function is still to link, but it does so with an air. In Mr. Alfred Sutro's little play *The*

¹ See page 194.

Open Door,¹ Lady Torminster and Sir Geoffrey Transom are talking late at night in her drawing room. She has asked him to recommend a bed-book, and he, jestingly, offers her a Popular Astronomy, saying,

"That will send you to sleep."

"The stars frighten me," she replies. "But I'll try it." That unpretentious little phrase, "the stars frighten me," becomes a motif running through the play, echoed by one or another speaker, gaining new meaning with each repetition until at last we see that it is a symbol standing for certain distant, unattainable, terrifying things in Lady Torminster's life. Every now and then one finds symbols like this echoing through plays, maintaining sometimes the continuity of the deeper esoteric meaning, sometimes only coloring the dialogue with a melancholy, romantic echo. One may feel it to be very true and beautiful, or simply an artificial mannerism, according to the skill of the user.

A sharper and more brilliant use of echo has already been pointed out in Mr. Stanley Houghton's *Fancy Free*, in which the last line is an ironic repetition of a line introduced for that purpose into the body of the play.²

Of all instances I know of where the echo type of liaison is used for stylistic effect, the most notable is found in Pinero's comedy *The Gay Lord Quex*. It

¹ In *Five Little Plays*.

² See page 148.

occurs in the second act where the scene is, suitably, a charming old-world garden. For the benefit of those who do not know this famous play I will explain that Lord Quex is a gentleman long past his youth, and Muriel, his fiancée, is a very young girl who believes that she is in love with another man.

QUEX. (*With tender playfulness*) And so all these good things are to befall me after tomorrow?

MURIEL. (*In a low voice*) After tomorrow.

QUEX. When I approach, I shall no longer see you skim away into the far vista of these alleys, or shrink back into the shadows of these corridors (*prosaically*)—after tomorrow?

MURIEL. No—not after tomorrow.

QUEX. In place of a cold word, a chilling phrase, a warm one—after tomorrow.

MURIEL. I am going to try.

QUEX. If I touch your hand, you'll not slip it behind your back in a hurry (*touching her hand*)——?

MURIEL. (*Withdrawing it*) Not after tomorrow.

QUEX. But why, may I ask, is this bliss reserved till after tomorrow?

MURIEL. I had rather you did *not* ask me, Quex.

QUEX. No? I see, I am a day too soon in putting even that little question.

MURIEL. Oh, I'll tell you this—I am going to turn over a new leaf, after tomorrow.

QUEX. You! Your pages are milk-white. What can you detect upon one of them to induce you to turn it?

MURIEL. (*Gazing into space*) I—I've been scribbling there—scrawling—drawing pictures——

QUEX. Pictures—of what?

MURIEL. You shall know perhaps, some day?

QUEX. After tomorrow?

MURIEL. Yes, Quex, but—after many tomorrows.

A famous passage, about which people no doubt disagree, some finding it charming and others finding it affected and false. I shall not try to pass judgment. If the young dramatist likes that kind of thing he can try it in his own manner. There are possibilities.

8. Dialogue of Comedy.

Most young writers do better at tragedy and serious plays than at comedy. This is not surprising, since it takes more experience and more philosophy to see life from the point of view of humorous detachment than from the point of view of pity or fear. Sometimes when they attack comedy they are carried through to success by a natural gaiety which, although not the true comic spirit, is a good substitute; but usually they fall quite flat, for the simple reason that their comedy is not funny. A simple reason, but quite sufficient. Now comic effect derives partly from making people do funny things and say funny things, but more especially it derives from an appreciation of what is amusing in human character, that is to say, from a feeling that people are in themselves funny. You can't build comedy by devising a series of absurd catastrophes and sprinkling them with jokes. You must go directly to human nature, and that is why young people, who relish verbal jokes and practical

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jokes but do not as a rule relish character, fail in comedy. Nevertheless for the sake of those who do relish character I wish to point out what seem to me certain obvious facts about the handling of comic dialogue.

In the first place, paradoxes, epigrams, puns, and other forms of deliberate wit are not the best means of enlivening a dialogue. Very few people are clever enough to use them, and if they are not just right they are very bad. The plays of Oscar Wilde glitter with brilliant ornament of this kind, which is laid on the fundamental stuff of the dialogue very much as icing is laid on cake, but the imitators of Wilde prove that such verbal jugglery is not to be commanded by the mere will to do so, and that there is a vast difference between the true epigram and the false. Of course true brilliance of the Wilde kind is rare delight, but it is far from necessary to the comic dramatist.

The value of a humorous remark depends upon the light which it throws on character, and from this it follows that unconscious humor is the best. When Darling Dora, in the third act of *Fanny's First Play*, says, "Well, dearie, men have to do some awfully mean things to keep up their respectability," it sounds, thus set off from its context, like an uncut paradox of the school of Wilde. But its value comes from the fact that Dora is totally unconscious of making an epigram, is indeed putting forth what seems to her a common-sense observation on men growing out of the preceding dialogue. Only Dora, of all the people in the play,

could have made that remark, whereas the epigrams of Wilde, as has often been said, are interchangeable among half a dozen characters.

Humor in dialogue, then, grows out of humor in character; and the richer the humorous characterization is, the richer will be the dialogue. One fault that I have to find with the plays my students write is that instead of being rich their characterization is poor, so that, like poor soil, it has not the strength to produce a vigorous growth. In the chapter on characterization I advised creating strongly marked characters, that is people whose opinions, prejudices, limitations, weaknesses, and passions are plainly stamped upon them, because only from such people will you have dialogue which—in the current slang—"registers." Now dialogue that registers, or in other words has comic emphasis, must be accented just as character must be accented, in order to carry over the footlights. What usually pass for subtleties in stage dialogue are not, after all, so very subtle; they carry their labels plainly, as the characters do. Thus a certain amount of underlining, a certain amount of preparation, is needed for the effective points of dialogue, just as preparation is needed for the effective points of action. You can see a dramatist getting "set" for a laugh many lines—sometimes many pages—before the laugh is due. Upon these two methods—strong characterization and preparation—the successful registration of dialogue depends.

For practical illustration of both methods one can

not go to a better place, it seems to me, than the plays of Mr. Bernard Shaw. Few dramatists work more persistently, more intelligently, and more effectively to make the points of their dialogue "tell." I would ask the reader to open *Fanny's First Play* to the third act and read the whole of the dialogue between the Gilbeys and the Knoxes. It is, as I believe the English say, priceless.

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- Page, Brett: *Writing for Vaudeville*. Home Correspondence School. Springfield, Mass., 1915. A bulky and interesting treatise on the requirements of the two-a-day. Especially valuable for the reprinting of several popular vaudeville plays and sketches.

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- Baker, Elizabeth: *Miss Tassey*. Sidgwick and Jackson. London, 1913. An excellent tragedy of futility.
- Barker, H. Granville: *Three Short Plays*. Little, Brown. Boston, 1917. Sophisticated, clever comedies.
- Barrie, Sir James M.: *Echoes of the War*. Scribner's. N. Y., 1919. Contains, among others, the popular plays: *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals*, and *The Well Remembered Voice*.
- Barrie, Sir James M.: *Half Hours*. Scribner's. N. Y., 1914. Indispensable to the student, with such masterpieces as *The Twelve Pound Look*, *Rosalind*, and *The Will*.
- Beach, Lewis: *Four One-Act Plays*. Brentano. N. Y.,

1924. Mr. Beach's famous tragedy *The Clod* is much the best of the four.
- Bennett, Arnold: *Polite Farces*. Doran. N. Y., n.d. Clever and sophisticated.
- Bottomley, Gordon: *King Lear's Wife, and Other Plays*. Constable and Co. London, 1920. Very interesting examples of short plays in poetic form.
- Brock, Howard: *The Bank Account*. In *Plays of the Harvard Dramatic Club, 1st Ser.* Brentano. N. Y., 1921. A well-known and admired little tragedy of American life.
- Brown, Alice: *One-Act Plays*. Macmillan. N. Y., 1922. Plays for the most part in New England Dialect. The best is the delightful *Joint Owners in Spain*.
- Calderon, George: *The Little Stone House*. In *Fifty One-Act Plays*. Stewart, Kidd. Cincinnati, 1920. An excellent tragedy of Russian setting.
- Davis, Richard Harding: *Blackmail*. In Brett Page's *Writing for Vaudeville* (see above). A bully melodrama.
- Dell, Floyd: *King Arthur's Socks, and Other Village Plays*. Alfred A. Knopf. N. Y., 1922. Light, clever, and for the most part satirical plays for a similar audience.
- Downs, Oliphant: *The Maker of Dreams*. In Miss Helen Louise Cohen's *One-Act Plays by Modern Authors*. Harcourt, Brace, and Co. N. Y., 1921. A Pierrot play. Very popular—terribly popular.
- Dunsany, Edward Morton Drax Plunkett, Lord: *Five Plays*. Little, Brown. Boston, 1917. Again indispensable. Contains such jewels as *The Glittering Gate*, *The Lost Silk Hat*, and *The Golden Doom*.

- Dunsany, Lord: *Plays of Gods and Men*. John W. Luce. Boston, 1917.
- Dunsany, Lord: *Plays of Near and Far*. Putnam's. N. Y., 1923. Neither of these volumes is quite up to *Five Plays*, but there are good things there, and even the least of Dunsany's plays are worth studying.
- Ervine, St. John G.: *Four Irish Plays*. Macmillan. N. Y., 1914. Contains *The Magnanimous Lover*, one of the finest short plays in the language.
- Galsworthy, John: *Six Short Plays*. Scribner's. N. Y., 1921. These plays do not represent Mr. Galsworthy at his best, but they are interesting for the study of method.
- Gerstenberg, Alice: *Ten One-Act Plays*. Brentano. N. Y., 1921. Several of these have been very popular with amateurs,—*Overtones*, *The Pot Boiler*, *Fourteen*.
- Glaspell, Susan: *Plays*. Small, Maynard. Boston, 1920. Contains the famous little tragedy *Trifles* and the more famous satiric farce *Suppressed Desires*.
- Goodman, Kenneth Sawyer: *Quick Curtains*. Stage Guild. Chicago, 1915. These plays deserve more attention than they have had.
- Gregory, Augusta Isabella Persse, Lady: *Seven Short Plays*. Putnam's. N. Y. The Irish comedies in this volume are the best that Lady Gregory has written in this vein. The best liked are *The Workhouse Ward* and *Spreading the News*.
- Hankin, St. John: *The Constant Lover*. In Frank Shay's *Fifty One-Act Plays*. Stewart, Kidd. Cincinnati, 1920. A sentimental light comedy with a touch of cynicism.
- Hawkrige, Winifred: *The Florist Shop*. In *Plays of*

- the Harvard Dramatic Club, 1st Ser.* Brentano. N. Y., 1921. Along with Brock's *The Bank Account*, this nice little comedy made the first issue of the Harvard plays the best that has yet appeared.
- Houghton, Stanley: *Five One-Act Plays*. Sidgwick and Jackson. London, 1913. An excellent collection of artificial comedies, containing *Phipps*, *Fancy Free*, and *The Dear Departed*.
- Jones, Henry Arthur: *Her Tongue*. In *The Theatre of Ideas*. Doran. N. Y., 1915. A very competent comedy.
- Maeterlinck, Maurice: *The Intruder*. In Frank Shay's *Fifty One-Act Plays*. Stewart, Kidd. Cincinnati, 1920.
- Maeterlinck, Maurice: *Interior*. In *Three Little Dramas*. Brentano. N. Y., 1915.
- Maeterlinck, Maurice: *The Blind*. In Moses's *Representative One-Act Plays by Continental Authors*. Little, Brown. Boston, 1922. Maeterlinck's early plays are technically heretical and consequently interesting to the student.
- Middleton, George: *Embers, and Other One-Act Plays*. Henry Holt. N. Y., 1913. Probably the best of several volumes of Mr. Middleton's characteristically earnest plays.
- Millay, Edna St. Vincent: *Aria da Capo*. In Shay's *Fifty One-Act Plays*. A play of charming originality, even if a little bewildering.
- Morley, Christopher: *One-Act Plays*. Doubleday, Page. N. Y., 1924. Very light comedies.
- O'Neill, Eugene: *The Moon of the Caribbees, and Other Plays*. Boni and Liveright. N. Y., 1919. Contains

- some of the best of Mr. O'Neill's short plays.—*Bound East for Cardiff, In the Zone, 'Ile.*
- Schnitzler, Arthur: *Anatol.* Little, Brown. Boston, 1921. In Granville Barker's excellent translation. These comedies should be known by heart.
- Schnitzler, Arthur: *Comedies of Words.* Stewart, Kidd. Cincinnati, 1917. Contains, notably, the brilliant ironic comedy *Literature.*
- Shaw, George Bernard: His *Augustus Does his Bit, How He Lied to her Husband, Overruled, The Man of Destiny, The Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet* are all published by Brentano. None is a model of construction, nor on the whole do they show Mr. Shaw at his best in dialogue, but there are brilliancies in each, and the last two are interesting studies in what might be called melodrama for the intelligentsia.
- Strindberg, August: *Plays, 2nd Series.* Translated by Edwin Björkman. Scribner's. N. Y., 1916. Contains such important plays as *Creditors, The Stronger, and Pariah.* No conscientious student of play-making will omit a thorough reading of Strindberg, in his long plays as well as in his short.
- Sutro, Alfred: *Five Little Plays.* Brentano. N. Y., 1921. Contains *The Man in the Stalls, The Man on the Kerb, and A Marriage has been Arranged,* all popular and expert.
- Synge, John Millington: *In the Shadow of the Glen.* John W. Luce. Boston, 1911.
- Synge, J. M.: *Riders to the Sea.* J. W. Luce. Boston, 1911. A description of either of these plays should be quite unnecessary.
- Torrence, Ridgely: *Three Plays for the Negro Theatre.*

- Macmillan. N. Y., 1917. *Granny Maumee* and *The Rider of Dreams* are both plays of unusual quality, among the best that have been turned out in this country.
- Walker, Stuart: *Portmanteau Plays*. Stewart, Kidd. Cincinnati, 1919. Contains some of the best of Mr. Walker's whimsical creampuffs,—*The Medicine Show*, *Nevertheless*, *Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil*.
- Washington Square Plays*. Drama League Series of Plays, No. XX. Doubleday, Page. N. Y., 1919. Rather a milestone in the history of one-act plays in America. Contains Mr. Beach's *The Clod*, Miss Gerstenberg's *Overtone*s, Mr. Edward Goodman's *Eugenically Speaking*, and Mr. Philip Moeller's *Helena's Husband*,—all worth knowing.
- Wilde, Percival: *Dawn, and other One-Act Plays*. Little, Brown. Boston, 1915. Mr. Wilde has published several volumes of capable plays. This contains one of the best, *The Finger of God*.
- Wisconsin Plays, 1st Series*. Huebsch. N. Y., 1914. Contains *Neighbors*, by Miss Zona Gale, and *In Hospital*, by Mr. T. H. Dickinson, both good plays.
- Yeats, William Butler: *Cathleen-ni-Houlihan*. In *Plays for an Irish Theatre*, 3 vols. A. H. Bullen. London, 1903. By far the best acting play from the pen of Mr. Yeats, although the poetic glamour of *The Land of Heart's Desire* has given it some vogue.

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